

STAR DUST

*But he knoweth the way
that I take: when he hath
tried me, I shall come
forth as gold.*

JOB 23:10

'n' MUD

A brave and heartfelt memoir

LESLEY D.

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This book is dedicated to
those souls who have
endured unbearable suffering

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Prologue

From the age of a very small child I could remember back to, the time, before I was born. The experiences of that pre-birth time lived deep in my sub-conscious until I was old enough to talk. I told my mum of my memory and because she listened to me with a smile, she made me feel that she didn't disbelieve me, therefore all my life I thought it was perfectly normal to have this memory...

I am so comfortable within my snuggle pod. The colours are deep, deep red, like the richness of warm blood. There is light, but not from one place, more like a vast space, illuminated by life itself. I sense there are many others imbedded in their own snuggle pods too. Some near to me and some are far away, above and below. All are hidden within this dome of dull gentle light.

Wait! Two old ladies are taking me somewhere. I don't want to go.

'Why?' I ask them. Not in words.

'You have to be born,' they insist. Again, not with words.

They are standing on each side of me upon a flat surface so big that I can't see the edge. It fades into darkness under a spiral, rising directly up from around us, up so high that I can't see where it finishes.

My will does not want to go. I am comfortable here.

Without spoken words, each holding my hand they repeat, 'You have to be born to learn to love God.'

Little could I have known that only through much suffering and hardship would the word of their prophecy be fulfilled.

Chapter One

MY STARDUST WORLD

At first, my early life was filled with yellow daffodils growing wild under tall, swaying, leafy gum trees, reaching up over me when I sat on the grass outside. The side of the house was hedged with a blackberry bush; I played there often, pretending that the old broken stovetop, discarded under the house, really cooked my blackberries. It was my very own magic stove in my secret world, placed there just for me.

My secret world was like stardust, but my 'real' world was much harsher. Two world wars had left many Australian families in the muddy waters of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and mine was one of them. The image of dad sitting up all night in his chair in the lounge room, with a home-made weapon beside him, remains burnt into my memory.

Nearly every male in our family, except my older brother, served Australia in the AIF. The consumption of alcohol was prominent in their life for numbing the trauma of their war experiences.

Two of my uncles fought in PNG, one of them on the Kadoka Track. My grandfather, who served all his life in the Australian army was awarded the British Empire Medal in 1958, suffered from both alcoholism and a gambling addiction. He was a war hero, but he got a 17-year-old girl pregnant when he was 40. The brother of mum called Gilbert, who lived in Brunswick, was a paedophile. When he was kicked out of the Korean War, for molesting children, my grandfather's his high-ranking, Army mates, had any records pertaining to his discharge erased as a favour because of the shame it would bring to the family.

My grandfather's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder badly affected my own mother, who also had PTSD.¹ She was gang raped when she was fourteen and had had a tooth punched out. She had never received counselling or any treatment for that event.

Mum was strong, dogmatic, fiercely loyal and patriotic, devoting her care to anyone who fought in the Australian Armed Forces. She prided herself on being a practical thinker who always knew the right thing to do. Her organizational skills were to be obeyed. She knew the correct protocols for how everything should be done; parties, shopping, cleaning, nursing the sick, walking down the street, the proper way of greeting friends and strangers. No one dared get in her way when she was on a "mission", whether she was feeding the hungry or going out partying.

Mum dressed to perfection and could dance like a diva. She also became wild and loud after a few drinks. Her flirtations caused many arguments and accusations among the women in her social circles because their men followed her every move with their eyes. She danced out her sorrows for the 94 years of her life to waltzes, rock and roll and many other tunes, with suggestive repertoires that only she could do.

The thumps of loud music from Mum's parties often woke me from my sleep in my cot. Often, I was picked up and taken into the lounge room and placed on the floor to be shown off to Mum's friends. I stood in the centre of the room, looking up at the faces of drooling men smiling at me through dirty teeth and bloodshot eyes.

'See how cute she is?' It was my mother's voice behind me, bragging and laughing about my belly button exposed above my nappy. My eyes were level with the brown bottles, standing close to the sides of the chairs, the only things in the room that were my height. My mother didn't notice my embarrassment. But I did not want these strange people looking at me. I did not like the men, the bottles or my mother doing this to me.

Before I was old enough to start school, I was minded by an old widow around the corner. My brother used to walk me to her house on his way to school, entertaining me all the way as we skipped along, making up funny ways to say her name. 'Dendy, Fendy, Hendy, Bendy,' we giggled together.

Mrs Dendy also looked after another little girl who suffered from some kind of skin disease that she was forbidden to scratch.

'If she scratches you tell me,' ordered the old lady, but I wouldn't tell.

Suddenly, one day, she came yelling into the bedroom. 'Lean over the bed and pull your pants down!'

Whack! Whack! Whack! went her wooden hairbrush, stinging my little bottom. I didn't cry and I didn't tell my mum. Soon after, there was a drama around the neighbourhood. Mum hid with us inside the house and told us laughing, 'Mrs Dendy was just taken to jail. She was caught for chasing the policeman down the street with a carving knife!'

The first dream I remember as a young child was about me and my mum at a public swimming pool near the shops at Wentworth Falls. Coloured, fine gauzy scarves hung on the rail next to the pool. As we were

swimming together suddenly the water began to get deeper and deeper and Mum started to panic.

‘Don’t worry, Mummy, it’s only the scarves making the water get deeper,’ I explained to her. Ignoring me she climbed quickly out of the pool. I kept calling to her from the pool as I watched her get on a bus and leave me.

As an adult, I was told that around the time of that dream, my mother had run off with another man. My dad had tried to kidnap me. They had a tumultuous relationship, but then, he had had his own childhood traumas.

When he was very young, his own mother had run away with another man. When he was six and his brother four years old, they were left at a Salvation Army home in Victoria by their father. Some money was left with the Home for their keep. The little brother was adopted out, and when the money ran out, the Home put Dad out on the street. He was found starving, eating out of garbage bins. He was put into hospital and brought back to health on bananas. It took nine months.

When Dad was taken back to the Home, they gave him to a solicitor who kept him for four years, sexually assaulting him. Finally, he was adopted out to an old widow who used him to work her 200-acre property near Kyneton in Victoria. He had to pump the organ for hymns at church on Sundays. If he let it slow down or if he couldn’t later remember the sermon he was whipped with the horsewhip. Dad was not allowed to wear shoes to school because they said he was a “gutter snipe”.

When World War II broke out Dad lied about his name and age and enlisted. He served six and a half years including in the Middle East, France, Greece, North Africa, PNG. He married my Mum in 1945 then studied a Diploma of Radiology that gained him the position of Chief Radiographer at a major hospital. Dad was an alcoholic, compulsive

gambler, drug addict and child molester, but as a small child, I remember the night he fought very bad fires in the Blue Mountains. When I walked into the kitchen, I saw my father sitting at the table, his head in his hands and crying. His shirt had burn holes all over. He was telling Mum that he had found a man, dead, under the charred walls of his burned-up house.

‘He was burned black,’ he told my mother, ‘with his arms around his wife and child.’



I had been attending Wentworth Falls Infants School since I was four and a half but when I was six my life was turned upside-down. Nothing was explained to me; we just moved. My mother had continually drummed into me, ‘Always do what the adults say and always use your manners!’ So, I just went with them; I had no say in any matter, but I felt so sad about leaving my friends, school and our bushy home. But there was a new adventure altogether ahead for me; the ocean!

The first time I saw it, I stood on the yellow beach at the edge of the water watching in awe and amazement at the huge waves rolling in one after another, crashing and smashing on the sand before me. White bubbling foam caressed my feet and all along the beach were little white stars.

‘They’re seashells,’ Mum said.

The sand sparkled and crunched between my toes. In silent wonder I enjoyed, heard, saw, smelt and felt the ocean on my face, hands, feet and hair.

Mum took my hand and led me up from the beach to her friend’s flat. After I met the lady, she invited me to go down to the back yard where

there was a strawberry patch.

‘Pick as many as you like,’ she told me.

While I was sitting, smelling and touching the beautiful, fat red strawberries, I could still hear the ocean rumbling nearby. Gradually the garden went quiet. The strawberries, the leaves on the trees, the ocean – as one, they radiated the presence of God, and I felt close and comfortable with Him. For a long time, I sat in the quiet oneness.

I collected a handful of strawberries and took them up for Mum and her friend.

‘Was it nice in the garden?’ they asked me, but I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to tell them all about it, but I didn’t know the words.

Life in our new rental house seemed good. It was small and old with a sandy yard and an old chook pen down the back. We played darts in the shed, fighting mosquitoes with insect spray. Sometimes we went fishing and Mum sang through her housework every morning. Trees lined the mile-long walk to the new school and there were lots of children that lived in the streets nearby. Soon, there would be another. One morning, Mum pulled me up onto her lap and explained why she had a big tummy, though I already understood. ‘I have a baby in my tummy and soon you will have a little brother or sister.’

When the Christmas holidays came around it meant that we would be off to Melbourne, to my grandmother’s house. This year was extra special because Pa was going to be Santa and all my cousins would be there.

Uncle and Auntie were down from New Guinea with my little cousin. My other Uncle Gilbert had his four children there too. Glasses of beer kept special place on the table, continually filled from brown bottles, forever forthcoming against my grandmother’s protests. We all squashed into the small lounge room gazing at the Christmas tree in the corner lit up

by coloured lights. Underneath were parcels wrapped in brown paper tied with string. There was one present for each person from 'Santa' between Pa's deep chuckles of 'Ho, ho, ho!' and his sips from his glass.

It was a joyful day, which turned to grief later that night, when Pa died.

I had already gone to sleep but was woken by the sound of him passing by my bedroom door.

'Milk! Milk! Milk!' he called out.

Then came the patter of my grandmother's small feet running down the hall, and her high-pitched voice. 'Da-ad, Dad, are you, all right?'

Pa's voice stopped in the lounge room and there was a gurgling sound. I didn't hear him again.

When my grandmother caught up to him, she began wailing over and over. 'He's gone, he's gone, Dad's gone. Oh! Dad's gone!'

The house was filled suddenly with distressed voices calling to each other from different rooms. Panicked footsteps were running up and down the passageway past my door. Suddenly Mum came bursting into my room, 'Stay there and don't come out!' she said, slamming the door behind her.

I knew in my heart that Pa had died but all I could do was lay in the big bed, stiff with fear, staring through the dark, waiting for the door to open again. For a long time, everything was silent, apart from some noises when I heard my family leave, I didn't know where they went. I held my breath listening for any sounds, but there were none, until I heard my grandmother call.

Her voice was wobbly. 'Lesley? Come here.'

I felt relieved to hear her. Slowly I opened the bedroom door, remembering that the sounds of Pa had stopped in the lounge room. I hesitated, and then quickly ran through the dimly lit room, keeping my

eyes focused on the kitchen door where Momma, my grandmother, would be waiting in the kitchen at the big round table.

When I came in, she asked, 'Lesley, bring me a blanket from the cupboard in the passageway.'

As I turned back to go through the lounge room again, I braved a long look sideways. Pa was sitting in his big red chair. His eyes were closed as if he was sleeping. Dried, dark-red blood had left a bubbly track where it had gushed out of his ears, nose and mouth, covering the front of his dressing gown then spilling down onto the arm of his chair. I didn't know that death looked like this. I stood motionless, staring at him as Momma took the blanket from my arms.

'Help me cover Pa,' she said. The terrible sight of my Santa Claus Pa, covered in blood, disappeared under the old blanket.

'Now go back to your room before your mother gets back,' she said.

When everyone came back, they had a doctor with them. No-one paid any attention to me except my brother. Packed with emotion, he told me, 'You didn't love, Pa, because you didn't cry'. It was my brother's birthday, and I didn't have the words to tell him how I felt.



Back in Woy Woy, my room in our rental home was at one end of the built-in veranda. At the other end of the veranda was a second room that was being prepared for the new baby. My room had been partitioned off by a low wall. I often climbed the wall to look over into Mum's bedroom and the front door entrance.

One night a man came around demanding rent money.

‘You’re not getting any,’ Mum and Dad told him, and then turned off all the lights leaving him standing inside the front doorway. I climbed up on my wall and watched him, sitting in the dark for a long time. Finally, he gave up with an angry shrug and left.

The next night I woke up to the sounds of my mother screaming. Again, I quickly climbed up to look over the wall. She was crawling on her hands and knees all around their bedroom floor. ‘There’s something wrong,’ she cried, over and over again. Dad was trying to help her, but she just kept yelling.

‘Something’s wrong! Give me a tablet, now!’

The scene frightened me. I felt guilty that I was sneakily watching and guilty because I was unable to help her. Next morning Mum was gone, and I was sent in to be minded by the nice ladies who lived next door.

When Mum came, home a few days later, the sadness she brought with her filled our house. She explained to me, very briefly as she was unpacking, that the baby had died. I was expecting her to tell me more, but she never spoke to me about my sister again. Over the following years, I didn’t understand why, but I felt like crying, every day. Mum seemed always sad and angry with Dad.

Dad got the sack from work, and our family was emptied of hope and filled with grief. Mum said in later years, that dad was gambling and borrowing money from his work colleagues at the hospital. He did not pay his debts and earned a reputation as a confidence trickster!

Chapter Two

I started to think that everything was going to get better; our family was building a new house, just down the road, on a small vacant block of land. It had a sandy track at the front of it that converged onto a large parcel of scrubby land that went all the way to where the new Woy Woy high school was going to be built. We often walked down the street to see how it was coming along. It took two years to build.

When it was finished, we moved in. The same sadness, my parents were trying to escape from, followed us there.

In the daytime Dad was really grumpy, growling at my brother and me over anything. He was always getting sleeping and nerve tablets from the doctors. Mum got a job housecleaning, but she was always yelling at him.

‘I have to go to work just so we can keep the house,’ she yelled.

Every night they argued about money, Mum standing over Dad snarling at him. ‘You are just a bludger, look at you sitting, sitting all day in that chair. What have you done today? Nothing! I’ve got to go out there and clean other people’s toilets because you’re a bludger.’

The adult world continued on like a stormy backdrop to my eight-year-old life. Their rumblings and explosions rolled into each other as I carried on doing what little girls do, playing make-believe in the backyard with mud pies and dressing dolls, playing with my school friends who lived near me, and sleeping over at my friend Mary's house.

My mother always went to bed after work, with a sleeping pill, about 7pm. Dad sat up alone in the lounge room watching TV. Sometimes he would come into my room and wake me up, quite drunk, and recite hymns and prayers from a little army book he had used during the war. He told me one night about his French lover; when he was sleeping with her, he woke up during the night and caught her using a torch out of the window. She was sending information she had seductively gotten out of him.

He said, 'I jumped up and put a bayonet through her.'



One night, Dad was doing something strange, talking in whispers to me. I emerged from sleep to find my hand on something watery; he was making my hand move up and down with his. I felt afraid and terrified: what was happening was not right. My eyes went to open, but I quickly shut them tight and tried to make out I hadn't woken up. I didn't know what to do; fear froze me.

Then in a soft slow voice he said, 'I know you're awake and you like it don't you? I can see your eyes moving and you know what you are doing.' Guilt filled my tummy.

Sometime later, Mum had gone away somewhere. I didn't know where; our household was tumultuous. That night, Dad took me into his bed and I woke up in the night with his head down between my legs.

My body, my whole being, only knew fear and terror. I couldn't move; horror had frozen all of me. I wanted to tell him, 'This is not right!' but my voice didn't work. Screaming in my mind, I cried, 'Stop, stop. Please stop!' but he didn't hear me.

'I can feel all the little new hairs,' he whispered in a slippery voice. I felt sick. I don't know this man. Where was my Daddy? My heart cried out, 'Help!' But the one whom I would have gone for help to, was the one hurting me.

Not long after that, Mum got me swimming lessons with Mr Smedli, in the local seawater baths just down from the pub. On my first lesson I was the only child in the pool. As he was teaching me to float, he started blowing bubbles on my privates in the water. I instantly knew it was wrong and wriggled away from him, afraid. I ran in, terrified, to the gate of the pub and Mum came over.

'Have you finished already?'

I didn't know the words, but I managed to say, 'He was doing something strange to me.'

'Are you sure? What did he do?'

'He was blowing bubbles... down there...' I motioned to my private regions, ashamed.

Mum went into a rage there and then, on the steps of the pub and mentioned reporting it to the police. She didn't speak to me about it again, but I didn't have any more lessons.



One of the things I loved to do was take my brother's small battery-powered record player out onto the front porch and pretend I was on stage

before the world. I had such fun dancing to the Cream or Vanilla Fudge. I could sing as loud as I liked because there was about two acres of bush opposite our house. No one could hear me, or so I thought.

At this point in time the new High School had just opened, and they were preparing the land next to it to become an oval.

One particular Saturday, when I was home by myself as usual, a truck pulled up with a load of grass. Carrying out my usual performances, I didn't notice the men laying the grass rolls, watching me.

After a while I took my toys inside and went to do something else. There was a knock at the door. Immediately a strange a sense of danger came over me, but I didn't take any notice of it. When I opened the door two big men were standing there, in what looked like football jackets.

'Can we have a drink of water?' one asked me. 'We are so thirsty.'

I was perplexed, but it *was* a very hot day and our family *did* always help other people so I went to the sink and poured two glasses of water.

As I walked back to the front door with the glasses, the bad feeling got stronger. I handed them the water and went to shut the door quickly but one of the men put his foot in the way. I tried to push the door shut but he shoved it open, nearly pushing me backwards with the force.

I ran into the kitchen, panicking, but they followed me in, saying evil things I didn't understand. As they came towards me, I ducked between them like a bullet running outside, down the porch stairs and out to the front gate. I stopped to look back and braced myself, ready to make a run for it.

The two men came out of the front door and swore at me all the way down the path to the front gate. I stood ready further along the dirt track ready to run but they walked slowly past me. As they did one of them put

out his hand and said, in a most horrible voice, 'I could stick my fingers in your C*** and rip you into two pieces.'

They kept walking back over to the school, laughing together as they went.

I was totally terror-stricken. When I saw they had gone a safe distance away from me, back to their work, I ran back inside and locked all the doors and windows. I didn't play for the rest of the day; I just walked around the house watching out of every window. I didn't understand what they had meant when they said they could f*** me, or anything they were talking about.

I didn't tell my parents about what had happened. I thought it might have been my fault.



When I was ten years old, my friend Mary stayed at my place. We had a plan: we were going to watch the Horror movies on TV, Friday night. We made up the night-n-day for us to sleep and collected everything we needed placing them next to our bed: our treats, a hammer and the fly spray. 'If an intruder breaks in I'll hit him over the head with the hammer,' I planned, 'and you can spray him with the fly spray.' After the show finished, we went off to sleep confident we were fully armed.

In the middle of the night, a light, and strange sounds woke me. As my eyes opened the first thing, I could see was the side of Mary's face, close to mine, wet with tears rolling down her cheeks. She was whimpering and sobbing. I quickly sat up to see my father's head down between Mary's legs. Instant anger and rage overtook me. In tears I threw my fists at him,

punching and screaming as hard and as many times as I could, 'Get away from her! Get away from her!'

Just at that very moment Mum walked in the lounge room to see Mary and I crying. Dad moved quickly to the end of the night-n-day, smirking at us.

'What's going on?' She asked looking back and forth from us to him. An expression of realization, turning to panic, passed over her face.

I blurted out, 'He's been licking Mary between the legs.'

Tears were streaming down my face. Mary was curled up in a ball sobbing.

Rushing at him she asked, 'Is this true?'

'No!' he said, slurring the words, 'I didn't do anything.' He pointed at me. 'They're only crocodile tears, look at her, she's lying.'

Mum quickly put her arms around Mary and then got on her knees. 'Mary, look at me. Please don't tell your parents because they will call the police and he will be charged,' she asked. 'Leo will be put into jail and you don't want him to go to jail, do you?'

Mary kept sobbing with her head down.

Mum pleaded more intensely. 'Please, Mary, don't tell your parents, promise me.'

Mary, still sobbing, quietly promised with half a nod. She didn't stay at my place again.



I could not go to sleep at night unless I imagined long scenes where someone would cause me to suffer. Only then I would cry myself to sleep. I became withdrawn outside of school and wandered about town, sometimes

walking down to the pool. Sometimes I stayed home, going through mum's drawers. After school I waited alone in the house until Mum came home from work.

Once I felt I needed to get some help for the loneliness I felt, so I wrote a letter to the 'Dear Del' column in the *Daily Mirror*.

Dear Del

I am 11 years old and my brother is 17 and he doesn't love me anymore.

What can I do?

Lesley

Del published my letter and wrote some advice back to me.

Dear Lesley

Your brother does love you; it just seems that he doesn't at the moment. It is normal for teenagers to behave this way and when you are both older everything will be alright.

Del

When my brother came home, he was furious with me. He worked at the paper and everybody stirred him about his little sister's letter. He left that job.

In the sixth-class yearly exam I came second (even though I cheated "a bit" off my friend sitting next to me). I thought it was a good result, so I didn't expect to be put down in the second lowest class when I went to high school. I felt totally humiliated and let down. It really took the wind out of my sails. I felt I had been robbed.

‘See? You’re stupid,’ my family kept telling me. Now I was convinced I was.

The high school building was square with a quadrangle in the middle. The Headmasters office was at the front of the school and our house was in the street (or track) behind. There was still plenty of sand and scrub between the school and us, and the sandy track became a flowing river every time it rained heavily. Quite often motorists, unacquainted with the dangers of the area, would get themselves bogged in the sand or the mud, trying to take a short cut on their way to or from town. Dad always left a shovel at the fence to help get bogged cars out.

One Saturday, when I was alone in the house, I was watching Tarzan. When I finished, I thought it would be a good idea to dig a trap like Tarzan had done to catch a lion. I used Dad’s shovel at the fence, and dug a hole, up to my ten-Year-old height, which I covered over with bracken. With my ‘trap’ finished I wandered down to the pool at Woy Woy and spent the afternoon throwing mud at the boys. On my way home some neighbours came out of their houses to talk to me.

‘Did you dig that hole in front of your house?’ they asked. ‘You’re in a lot of trouble. The police are looking for the person who dug it because they drove into it and broke their axle.’ I didn’t know what an axle was, but I was thankful that the neighbours didn’t dob me in.



About one month before I turned twelve, my life changed in drastic ways.

I was walking up the steps of the front porch as usual after school. An old brown suitcase sitting on the porch drew my attention. Curiously I wondered as to what it might be doing there. Was someone leaving? I

wouldn't have been surprised. Suddenly, the door opened. I went to step in as usual, but the person opening it was only letting it open a few inches.

It was Dad, but I could hardly see him. Half his face was obstructed by the doorway. He looked pained, and he spoke in a forced matter-of-fact tone. 'You can't live here anymore,' he said, his finger sticking out of the door pointing to the suitcase. 'Your mother's run off with some bloke and I might hurt you. I've ordered you a taxi and am sending you around to the Smedli's.'

Then, *bang!* The door shut in my face.

I stood staring at the faded blue door for some time, stunned. Without a word I waited obediently near the gate, the suitcase at my side. When the taxi pulled up on a grassy bit of the track, I slid into the backseat, bewildered and perplexed.

It pulled up again at the Smedli's house and Mrs Smedli came out of the front door staring at me wearing a questioning expression on her face. As I opened the cab door and placed my feet on the ground with my suitcase in hand, she came towards me with open arms.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'Why the case?'

My mouth opened to give an answer but to my surprise I cried out loudly with a pleading, sobbing voice, 'Dad kicked me out.' My tears burst out and I cried inconsolably into her body as she pulled me tightly to her with her arms.

'That bastard,' she cursed in my ear through gritted teeth. 'That bastard.'

The Smedli's lived in a small unpainted fibro house. The few old citrus trees scattered around their sandy yard were loaded with stink bugs. They lived there with their three children, a 16-year-old girl who was known to the police, a 15-year-old son also known to them and a tall, solid girl my age

who I called “Big E” because she was nearly twice the size of me. It was Mr Smedli who had given me “that” swimming lesson four years earlier.

Mrs Smedli settled me into E’s room, giving me the bed under the window. Big E shared the bottom of the double bunk with her big sister, though her sister didn’t use it, preferring to sleep at her boyfriend’s house near the beach.

While I was placing my meagre possessions into the empty dressing table drawer, E sat on the bed instructing me how to avoid the dangers of living at her house:

‘Don’t sit on dad’s lap if he asks you to.’ She listed her pieces of advice on her fingers. ‘Don’t make my brother angry because he recently split my head open with a brick.’ She considered for a while. ‘Just do what I say, and you won’t get hurt.’

That night she invited me to go out with her and her boyfriend to visit her sister at the beach house. He picked us up in his Holden sedan and we drove over the mountain, down into a small, sandy beach town. Pulling up in front of a little old rundown house, I noticed a few boys hanging around the overgrown unkempt front yard. When I met them, I found out that surfing was their common interest. They were one of many groups that beachcombed the Coast during the day and watched surfing movies at night. They lived, breathed and dreamed surfing.

I hung around with this group like an orphan. But they were good to me. They fed me and let me sleep in the beach house. During the week I went to school from E’s and slept in her room. On the weekends I hung off the group or slept on the beach.

One Sunday night one of the boys gave me some Blue Cheer, a type of LSD. I spent the night at E’s, huddled in the bed looking out of the window

into the dark, terrified of the prehistoric creatures I could see flying around outside which were trying to get in and hurt me.

Mr Smedli crept in when he thought both E and I were asleep. He sat on my bed and started slowly sliding his hand under my sheets. Under the influence of the LSD, he looked really evil to me – as if he had a clown's face. I started cursing and swearing at him, all the time punching at his hand in the sheets.

'Go away, you disgusting dirty old man!' I yelled at him in a shaky voice. As he left the room, he paused in the doorway to look back at me. He appeared to have ghostly colours moving around him.

My twelfth birthday came with no celebration on my part. My only mission was daily survival. I clung to anyone who would show me kindness or affection.

One morning, at the kitchen table, E was piercing my ears with ice cubes and safety pins. We started talking about our lives.

'Something terrible will happen to us one day,' she said.

'We'll be murdered, or something,' I agreed.

'We should write our wills, you know. Before we die.'

E fetched paper and pens, and we wrote out our wills, together with a list of our possessions.

I, Lesley D, leave everything to my friend Big E

1 holey singlet

1 pair of thongs

2 pairs of knickers

1 school bag

1 dress

1 cardigan

4 safety pins

On many school days I walked across the track from school at lunchtime, just to see if Dad was okay. The door was always locked, and no one was ever inside. I became more and more desperate, until one day, I found a hammer on the ground. I bashed and bashed at the door with it, until eventually I heard him yell from inside the house.

‘Stop!’

I waited until I heard the bolt slip open, then pushed the door in only to be met with darkness. It took a minute to focus clearly, and then I saw piles of flagons, dirty cigarette butts and dirty sheets. There amidst the stinking mess was Dad.

‘Don’t come here anymore,’ he said, not even looking at me. He just looked sad. ‘I don’t care, and I don’t want to live.’

The house had been shut up and smelt like the inside of a garbage bin. The sadness was thick in the air. As I followed him into the house, I noticed he was thin and bent. He walked back to his bed, which was completely surrounded by empty flagon bottles. The sides of the bedroom doorway were singed black all the way up to the ceiling with burn marks on the walls.

‘What happened here?’ I asked.

‘I dragged a burning mattress out of the house.’

‘What about the newspaper?’ There was newspaper stuffed into every cranny.

‘I was going to light it and set the house on fire.’ His eyes had swollen bags under them from where he had been crying. He was unshaven and unwashed.

‘Go away and don’t bash the door with a hammer again,’ he said in a voice muffled by forced-back tears.

As I made my way out of the gate and back to class, I noted all the empty flagons and wine bottles in the yard. My heart was weighed down with grief. I went back to school, but I had no interest in it. My mind was still in the dark house with dad who looked so sad.

A few weeks later I was called up to the headmaster’s office. I entered his room feeling quite afraid, as I had never been there before.

‘Come in, Lesley.’ He had me sit across from him at the desk and placed the black phone in front of me. ‘Your mother is on the phone,’ he said, studying my face for my reaction. ‘She wants to talk to you.’

I picked up the phone, my hand was trembling, and started sobbing, ‘Mu...mu...mum, where are you?’ Some words of assurance waffled through the phone from her but they could not comfort this broken child’s heart.

It was enough evidence for the Headmaster to do something.

Only days later, while I was sitting in class, a boy came to the door.

‘Mr Hart wants to see Lesley,’ he announced to the room. There was a general reaction. Children started to tease me. ‘Oooh, you must be in trouble,’ said one. ‘He’s the welfare officer.’

I did not know what a “Welfare Officer” was but I followed the boy to a tiny room, no bigger than a cupboard, in which a well-dressed man was sitting at the desk.

‘Sit down,’ he said. ‘I want to ask you some questions.’

I sat.

‘Do you know where your mother is?’

‘No.’

‘Have you been sleeping at home?’

‘No.’

‘Have you been sleeping at the Smedli’s?’

‘Yes.’

The welfare officer frowned. ‘Well, you can’t stay there,’ he said. ‘They’re in trouble with the police. Their children will be a bad influence on you.’ He wrote some things down on his piece of paper and then looked up at me. ‘Lesley, I have to arranged for you to go into a Welfare Home.’

Chapter Three

No one ever came to put me in a Welfare Home. A couple of days later, I was collected from school by Mum and her boyfriend. Russ was fat and green because he was suffering from lead poisoning. We both knew I didn't like him.

Mum had my suitcase, and all my stuff, collected from the Smedli's place. They took me to a garage at the back of her friend's house where she had been living for the last few weeks.

Mum's friend was called Matty, a friendly, caring, round woman who was in Mum's house cleaning team, working along the North Shore. She greeted us at her door and then walked with us down to the garage at the back. I slowly followed them in, assessing the meagre comforts of the garage. There was one ragged chair and a small square table, one old yellow fridge and a double bed I was to share with Mum.

The drooping floral curtain hanging by wire from the ceiling functioned as a room divider between our bed and my brother's single one, which was squashed into the kitchen.

There was no other information from Mum. Like the rest of my life, there was no such thing as the unexpected, because my whole life was unexpected. I had no idea how long we would be staying here, or what Mum's plans were. The fact that she had come to get me was no comfort to me. I didn't feel loved by her because she'd picked me up and had taken me away from the Smedli's. "Just controlled" was how I felt because even though the Smedli's household was violent also I could always escape and go out to the beach. I had learnt to run free by age 12 years with no adults telling me what to do.

I walked a lonely three miles to and from school each day. The sadness in my heart dragged down every step. There was never anyone in the garage when I got back in the afternoon, not until after dark when Mum came home from wherever it was, she worked. Mum never really talked to me; her attention was on her work, her friends or her boyfriend, and she was so highly strung that her throat would swell up with stress, nearly choking her. She seemed to live on the Valium pills she popped every day. I felt there was no space for me in her life.

Lonely times I spent in the afternoons sitting at the little kitchen table crying and listening to mum's small jewellery music box, which played "The Last Rose of Summer". I wound it up, over and over again, crying and winding, crying and winding until the room went dark. Sadness was life. At night, sleeping in the old sagging bed listening and watching the bedbugs from the mattress run up and down the walls only added to my "*this is not a home*" experience.

No one really seemed to know or care where I was or what I was doing on the weekends, consequently I frequented the dances in the local Masonic Hall. The Hitchhiker, Hanging Ten and the Twist were the "in" dances and the band played excellent surfing music mixed with rock and

roll. Outside of these places I wandered the streets and laneways aimlessly, often sobbing.

It was at the dance that I met my first boyfriend, Ronny, in 1966. He gave me my first beer and cigarette and he was very friendly to me. We met on the beach at night and at the pictures, where he mucked about a bit with me. I had no defences against him. I was in the dark of life exposed to the wrong side of freedom.

One night, I was waiting for Mum back at the garage. When she walked in, with my brother behind her, he announced in a self-righteous tone: 'Mum, did you know that Lesley has a boyfriend – and he's a half-caste!

Slap! went Mum's hand across my face. 'How dare you have a boyfriend!'

Slap! went Mum's hand across my brother's face. 'How dare you call anyone a half caste!'

I felt betrayed.

That same year I was at my grandmothers for the six-week Christmas break as usual. My uncle and his twelve-year-old son lived with my grandmother because my uncle had been in jail and his wife had left him, taking their three daughters with her. My cousin was a few months younger than me and shared a bedroom with his father.

One night, my uncle told me, 'Sneak up to our room and I'll give you some beer.'

I do not wish to go into details but my Uncle's entire talk that night included his exploits with his wife, who was a prostitute. We heard all about the wrong desires he wished to enact and was telling me to get into bed with his son and play with him. I didn't know it was wrong and neither did my cousin; we just giggled and didn't take it seriously. My Uncle was lying in his bed saying things we didn't understand. At that moment my

grandmother came walking up the passage into the kitchen and paused at the door of the bedroom. It was then, that guilt came over me: I had a sense that what we were doing was wrong. I stopped and when the coast was clear I crept back, drunk, to my room.

Those same holidays my uncle took me to a party and got me completely drunk on advocaat and cherry brandy. At twelve o'clock I proceeded to knock on everybody's door in the street and wish them a happy new year. Then I got into a car and started it, accidentally putting it into reverse and running down the fence next door, after which I passed out, half-hanging out the open door, vomiting. My uncle quickly whisked me away in a slight panic and got me into my room as sneakily and quietly as he could so as not to wake my grandmother.



When I returned from Melbourne my parents announced that they would get back together, to keep me out of a welfare home. Life was a bit different for a while; they tried to wrap me up in rules that hadn't mattered before, including forbidding me to hang around with E. One of my new jobs was to take the beer bottles down to the Bottle-o in the wheelbarrow and get money for them. The other was to cut the burnt ends off Dad's cigarette butts and separate the paper from the tobacco so that he could roll new ones.

Dad cleaned up his way of life a little and got a job on the new expressway, for a few months, with my brother. Mum continued to work down at the North Shore with the house cleaning team. My father soon went on the TPI pension full time, due to war injuries, both physical and mental.

Try as they might, however, happiness never came. I continued through my first and second years of high school, manoeuvring my way through the bitterness, hate, revenge, frustration, grief and sadness that dominated the whole of our lives. Mum and Dad had fallen into the same old patterns as before, only this time, it was gradually getting worse.

One day as I was arriving home, I could hear the usual yelling as I got to the front door, 'You've been up to see her again, haven't you?' screamed Mum.

'Yes,' Dad yelled back at her; his voice hard.

I opened the door slowly, my heart felt like lead and my soul faint. I don't know why but somehow, I knew they were talking about my baby sister, the one whom they said had died being born, when I was six years old. They had never spoken about her to me again, not ever, and yet somehow, I had a feeling this conversation was about her.

With my heart pounding and my voice wavering in confidence I asked them, 'Is my sister alive?'

'Yes!' they yelled back abruptly, in unison.

'Can I see her?' I asked, in the same sheepish voice.

'No!' was their only reply, and they continued their argument, ignoring me.² I listened, but it was hard to understand what had happened to my sister. Mum yelled the words 'alcoholic poisoning of the brain' at Dad during the argument, but I still couldn't put the pieces together. All I knew was that I missed my baby sister, even though I had never met her.



Mum didn't spend a lot of time at home; only to clean, sleep or have friends over for a party. Dad mostly sat in his chair in the lounge room,

sipping beer and sleeping. One day while Mum was out and I was just fluffing about the house, Dad called me into the lounge room. He was sitting in his chair with his packet of Champion Ruby tobacco on the little table next to him.

‘Here,’ he said, as he threw me the packet. ‘You can roll yourself a smoke and I won’t tell your mother.’ He reached down behind him and pulled out a bottle of wine he had hidden in the back of his chair. ‘Just don’t tell your mother I’ve got this.’

I was disarmed. The truth that confronted me rendered me dumb. I was angry; my dad who was meant to protect me was a liar; and he wanted to make a lying pact with me against my mother.

Dad had his little secrets, but he wasn’t pleased that my brother had seemed to take after him in hiding things away. I was washing up after tea one night when my father came in the back door. At the same time, my brother in the front door. They met in the kitchen behind me.

My father held up a little plastic bag. ‘Is this yours?’

‘Yes!’ my brother answered defiantly.

‘How dare you have this in my house,’ Dad said. He moved closer to him and waved the bag in his face.

My brother rose up to his full height and looked down on Dad. ‘Well, you wouldn’t have found it if you weren’t under the house hiding your bottle.’

Suddenly punches were thrown, and mum plunged into the middle to stop them. I just ignored the fight (this was nothing that unusual) and continued washing up, but suddenly Mum’s hand appeared in front of my face, holding the little plastic bag.

‘Here, Lesley, pour this down the sink, quickly!’ she said, and turned back to the fray.

This stuff must be very important to cause all this fuss, I thought. I tipped half the green powder down the sink, like Mum told me, but I slipped the rest into my pocket.

The next day at school I asked a couple of my brother's friends about what the green stuff was. They didn't seem interested in helping me until I showed them the bag. Their eyes nearly popped out of their heads and suddenly they were very helpful.

'It's green hash,' they told me. 'Come on, we'll show you what to do with it,' and they guided me into the girl's toilets. We sat together on the changing bench. They were almost drooling as they put a little on the end of a cigarette. 'Here – suck the smoke up through the straw.'

I sucked but it didn't feel too good in my throat. They quickly took their turn and kept the rest. When I went back to class, I asked my friend next to me to let me know if I did anything strange from the effects of the drugs. I waited all afternoon through the lessons, but nothing happened.

Pretty soon, I was smoking easily to get dope more and more, hanging out around the Ocean Beach pub on Friday and Saturday nights. The weekend started when I met a guy on the corner and paid him five dollars for a matchbox of grass. After a few private puffs the evening moved on, and I became immersed in friends, drinking and dancing to the band that played the same songs every night. I usually ended the night with a bottle of Brown Musket or Branda vino by myself, on the beach, crying.

One Friday night, as I was preparing to go out, ignoring the argument that was raging through the house, and ironing my maroon army jacket on the kitchen table, Mum started screaming from the bathroom.

'Quick! Lesley run out the front door and start screaming,' she yelled. 'Your father is going to kill me. He's got a sock full of rocks and he's going to hit me with it.'

This sounded worse than usual. At the threat of murder, I left my ironing and went flying into the bathroom, just as Dad's arm was raised, weapon in hand, to strike Mum. I clenched my fist and landed a right hook fair in Dad's face. He fell back slightly against the sink and Mum fled out the front door naked, clutching some clothes.

I went back to my ironing thinking how pleased I was with the gold and red braid I had sewn onto the jacket; it looked good, I thought. As I ironed, Dad found a wet rag to put on his swollen eye, and started walking around the house, feeling sorry for himself. He leaned on the fridge and cried. 'Look, Lesley. Look at what you've done. I might go blind in this eye.'

I was enjoying the way the iron smoothed over my jacket, but I had to answer him. 'Well, you would've killed my mum,' I said, with a chilled heart.

'No, I was only trying to stop her from going out,' he said, defending himself. 'I wouldn't have hurt her.'

I didn't believe him. I finished getting ready to go out but I didn't leave the house before throwing the sock of rocks away so that he couldn't use it again.

Despite my dad's altercation with my brother, drugs had already thoroughly saturated our family life. There was one cupboard in the kitchen solely dedicated to them. The local doctors seemed to give mum and dad whatever drugs they asked for and in any quantity. My knowledge of that medicine cupboard made it easy to take and sell my parents' sleeping tablets in the toilets of the pub. Mandrax³ was one such tablet that I thought I could make a profit with but when I saw the effect on my friends, I stopped selling it straight away.

Dad was out of it most of the time, asleep in his chair; he broke open sleeping pills and poured them into the beer or wine he hid around the

house. Both of my parents took them, however. The abuse of sleeping tablets to overdose levels became a regular pastime of my parents. If it wasn't Dad who was trying to kill himself, it was Mum. Calling the ambulance or covering up holes in the walls was just a way of life. The arguments of the night quieted down eventually because no one could win. They would give me a sleeping tablet saying 'Here, take this it will help you relax,'. Worried that they had badly affected me with their own behaviour they somehow thought a pill would fix me up.

In the middle of one of my many disturbed nights I was woken up by the sound of Dad desperately calling out Mum's name. Creeping out of my room and tiptoeing up to their room, I found him leaning over her.

'Bev! Bev!' he was yelling. Turning to me he said, 'Quick, hold your mother's tongue.' I tried to hold it, but it was slippery. He put a cup of black coffee up to her mouth. 'It's salted to make her vomit; she's taken some tablets.' He held her head and forced her to drink. She vomited after a few mouthfuls, still floppy, but groaning with her eyes half-open. I stood there, shocked and helpless to save her. I was shaking and uncertain if she was going to die.

'Go back to bed,' dad said, wiping mum's mouth and face with a wet cloth.

I lay in bed most nights, listening and expecting to hear someone choking on their tongue or find my parents murdering each other. I was afraid someone was going to die.

The fear grew. It was my job to put the dinner on every night before Mum came home from the pub after work, but when I heard anyone coming home, I would run out and vomit. When dad took me to the doctor, and I was told I had an ulcer.

The most enjoyable thing I ever did was take a horse out and ride around Woy Woy. That was freedom, if only I could ride forever.

Going to the picture theatre on Saturday afternoons was also something I enjoyed. One Saturday, I needed to go to the toilets, which were outside down at the back of the building. I found them occupied, though, so I walked around the corner to the ones at the sports oval. From the doorway, I noticed that there were empty beer bottles on the floor. A raging hate rose up within me at the sight of them. I had to do something. I picked up a beer bottle to smash it on the side of the toilet bowl but to my surprise the whole thing – bottle, and toilet bowl – smashed. It felt so good that I smashed all the bottles and all the toilet bowls.

When I walked out, I took a very deep breath as if for the first time. I felt better. I actually didn't think much about it after that... until the police knocked on our door.

I found out later that Big E was the one who had dobbed me in. 'For your own good,' she said.

It didn't feel good, the day I went to court. My parents stood on each side of me, each holding my hand, as if to form an unbroken wall. They stared desperately at the judge as he was deciding what to do with me. I was placed on a two-year bond and ordered to pay a \$250 fine and report to the Welfare Officer every month.

My reputation in town wasn't good, and my reputation at school was getting worse. I was supposed to be going into third year, but they repeated me and put me down in the lowest class in second year. One terrible Monday, after I had endured the usual weekend at home listening to my parents' hateful arguments, I brought my anger to school. Every teacher

that day suffered my abuse; I said the most wicked things I could think of to them, in front of all the class. Two of the teachers ran out of the room in tears.

That afternoon I was called up to the Headmaster's office. It seemed that all the teachers had had a meeting about me to have me expelled.

I sat quietly in front of the Headmaster in his office as he studied me for some time. It was a difficult silence. Finally, with a concerned look on his face he leaned forward. 'Would you like to do an apprenticeship as a book binder at the local printers?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Good, I'll give you the address. You will not come back to this school again.' Then in a softer tone he said, 'I hope you will work hard and do well.'

I turned up at the printer's the following Monday and went under the supervision of the senior Book Binder, a lady who looked about in her forties. There were also two young men about seventeen years old, whose job it was to place the metal letters in heavy trays that did the printing. The papers were then set in piles to be collated by my section, and glued in the binding process. I liked learning and I was very happy to have such a responsible job that needed me to be accurate.

This older woman used our work time together to lecture me in how to be a lady. She told me how I should dress and how disgusting I looked. I ducked out frequently to the loo for a smoke; it was becoming the only pleasure of the day. At morning tea and lunchtime, while we sat on the boxes outside, the boys also enjoyed having a dig at me. They mocked my position there and rubbed in the fact that I only got it because I was kicked out of school.

After three weeks I walked out and joined other kids in our wider circle who were also like me, survivors, running amuck around town. Some of them went to the Woy Woy picture theatre at night, and I started going too. It was called the Flea House because a thousand cats lived underneath it.

One night when the pictures were finished a few of us were talking in the little shop next door. Suddenly, Bill Smedli and his mate grabbed me. They pushed and forced me around to the dimly lit Sports oval, held me down on the wet grass and tried to have their way. I fought back—for two whole hours, punching and biting and keeping my legs closed. They ripped my clothes, bruised my arms and legs and called me horrible names. Eventually they gave up and left me there to find my way home in the dark, as it was too late for the bus.

Mum was standing on the front porch waiting for the police when I walked up the footpath to her. Grass was sticking out of my hair; dirt was all over my arms and legs and my nice clothes were torn. She was waving her arms in the air, talking incoherently about reporting it to the Police. I was shaken but I found no comforting arms or healing words from either her or my father. Nothing more was ever said about it except that one of the boys came from a respectable family and it was best not to cause trouble for them.

Chapter Four

My parents thought the best thing for me was to ground me to the house on weekends and prevent me from seeing any of my friends. I had only just met a new boyfriend called Peter, but they forbade me to see him. So, Saturdays had a new routine for me now. I had to stay in the house doing my allocated jobs, while my mother did a pub-crawl, my father went to the bowling club and my brother went surfing.

On one particular Saturday, my brother was the last to go out, but not before he pointed at me threateningly. ‘Stay out of my room!’

My brother’s small room opened to the hallway that led to the kitchen and into the lounge room. He had the most interesting room full of things like psychedelic posters, incense, an electric bass guitar and peculiar books. I snuck in as soon as he left and sat on the edge of his bed. The walls were painted a beautiful aqua and the sun shone onto me through the open window. I could hear the garbage contractor next door hosing down his trucks. I picked up a book from the table beside his bed and opened it up. The page was full of words, but my eyes fell on these: “The old law was a tooth for a tooth, life for a life and to curse your enemies.”⁴

A thought snarled through my heart, *Ha! I know that law, I live it.*

On the next page I read, “But Jesus came to bring a new law, the law of love where you forgive your enemies.”

When I read that word “forgive” a scowling thought rose up again: *I have never seen anyone do that.* A yearning flickered in the depth of my soul. *I wanted to have this wonderful thing, to be able to forgive.* For a fleeting moment I lost my awareness of place and time just thinking about that wonderful word. Until a dark realization came over me, *there would be no forgiveness in this life for me.* No longer did the mystery of my brother’s room urge me to explore anymore.

With a sigh I put the book back and walked out of his room feeling hopeless and went into the lounge room which had one night-n-day and a two-bob-in-the-slot TV. I sat down feeling lonely and sad beyond depression. Here was nothing for me to live for – only sadness. Hate and loneliness were all that existed for me.

I started thinking about the pills in the cupboard. My parents had shown me how easy it was to take them and end a life. Perhaps I should do it... just end it all.

While I was pondering on these thoughts, I noticed everything started to change. Suddenly, everything in the room looked different. Instead of hate, I saw it turn into love. I stood up. I could hear a rushing of water and I could see (with my mind’s eye) a waterfall of love pouring down into me from miles and miles high. It rushed into me, deeper than my mind, deeper than my soul.

Then, I saw a huge boulder of hate and bitterness roll out of my heart, pushed out by the force of this love. I was standing in the middle of the room in the presence of love and beauty. Tears were running down my cheeks. Over, and over I said, ‘You’re beautiful, you’re beautiful.’ I wanted it

to never end, but then, suddenly the presence started going. Immediately I ran out of the room to follow, out the front door and down the front path.

‘Don’t leave me,’ I yelled out. ‘Don’t leave me.’ I stopped at the gate. Only the bush track, scrub and the distant mountains were in view. Looking up at the brightness, I opened my mouth to call out once more, but instead I spoke in a different language.

A feeling of newness came over me.

Something wonderful had just happened but I didn’t know what it was.

I continued on, running out the gate and down to the local church. The Reverend might be able to help me understand, so I knocked on his door. It opened, and then stopped, just partly open, when he saw who I was.

‘Something has just happened to me,’ I tried to explain, and I started to give him the story.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about Lesley,’ he said.

And he shut the door in my face.

Turning away from the church door with my head down I slowly walked back to my parents’ house. I realized that there was no one on this earth I could talk to but even with these thoughts I felt my heart was lifted; though I didn’t understand it.

Chapter Five

My moment of happiness and beauty seemed lost to me forever; in my heart I continually lamented the absence of that beautiful presence that I had felt in our loungeroom. Life in Woy Woy however, continued on, in its usual way.

I could not go back to school and I needed to get a job. Eventually I found one at the local sewing factory with two hundred other women where I was the youngest at fourteen and ten months. The factory was a creaky old two-story building with a wooden floor. I started by picking cottons off finished garments, then I progressed through to the machines that required more skill to operate. There was a very large Floor Lady who had been working there forever. Her habit was to creep silently up behind you and wait until you talked to another worker, then growl as she pulled the hair behind your ear. Everyone was afraid of her. Unfortunately, I got the sack for talking. When I couldn't find any other work, I was so desperate that I went back to the boss in his office and begged. 'Please can I have my job back?' He gave it back to me, grudgingly.

I had a girlfriend who lived through the bush and over a creek. Her mum was friends with my mother therefore I was allowed to go to her place and stay on weekends. Her dad was the boss of a very respectable motor company in Gosford. She was two years older than me. Her boyfriend worked at the local fruit shop and she used to spend long nights with him. I stayed at her house on alternate weekends, going out in cars with other young people and drinking until I vomited.

On one of these nights her father took us around to his carport, opened his boot and offered us some speed for sale. We refused. Her dad used to molest his daughters; he tried it on me, but I stayed away from him. I stopped staying at my friend's house after she tried to touch me in bed one night. I told her, 'No that's not right.'

It was through this friend, though, that I met my next boyfriend. He provided for his elderly father and five sisters by working as a shunter on the steam trains. He had no front teeth; they had been eaten away by Coca Cola. He drank a lot, but he was very kind, and we got along like two broken souls together. I used to lie to my parents and tell them that I was staying at a friend's place and then spend the weekends with him. I felt free and like a newly married wife and I enjoyed playing house.

Over the next two years, my brother left home. My parents became more violent and I turned sixteen. I worked and did what young people in my town did; drink and drive around town, vandalizing anything that was loose along the street.

Then my toothless boyfriend left me for a woman with five children.

Mum lined me up with a boy she knew from the Leagues Club.

'Such a nice boy,' she said.

He was respectable to her face when he came to take me out, but when he got me into his car, he just wanted to maul me.

Christmas time came around and I was sent down to stay at my grandmother's house in Brunswick again. The Leagues Club boy kept writing love letters to me while I was in Melbourne but I didn't like him and didn't write back.

When my stay was coming to a close, I began to think about going back to Woy Woy. The more I thought about it, the more I realized, I didn't want to go back.

One day, I was down the street food shopping for my grandmother. Across the rows of vegetables, I noticed a young man. He was tall and blond and wore only a black leather vest over his tanned bulging muscles and jeans.

He noticed me too, and we began to chat.

'Want to go for a ride in my car?' he asked me, and as he was talking, a devious scheme came into my mind. *I can use him to help me escape my family.*

I interrupted him. 'I want to run away from my family, would you help me?'

'Sure,' he answered. He had a charming grin. 'What's your plan?'

'I'm due to catch the train back to Woy Woy,' I said. 'I can tell my grandmother that you are giving me a lift to the station and helping me with my bag.'

Too easily he agreed.

When the day came, I felt the links in the chain of my old life snap, one by one, with each step down the old brick path, away from the house and closer to his car. Looking back with a wave, I glimpsed the worried face of my grandmother, but I felt no remorse. My heart felt like a bird that was about to escape a cage.

I was naive and did not suspect that instead of driving me to freedom he was driving me back to his house, which he shared with two other men, to use me as a sex slave. For three weeks I was kept as a prisoner.

‘The police are looking for you,’ he told me. ‘You’re in trouble.’ I was too afraid to go outside.

Each night forced me to get into acrobatic positions while engaging in sex during which, when I had to do a cartwheel, I felt sharp pains in my back. I strained to support his weight. Each day I spent lonely hours, hiding in the house, crying, depressed. On the weekends he took me out in the car, speeding around the empty city streets of Melbourne until it was dark. On one of these nights he stopped in a laneway and told me to wait in the car. A song came on the radio and I turned it up full blast. The beat of the loud music took me away from the present, just as I was completely absorbed, he opened the door and drove us away in a panic.

‘What are you doing you stupid bitch? I was breaking into a shop and now someone will call the police....do you want me to get caught?’

I didn’t know what he was up to. He turned the music off

One afternoon when he arrived home, he picked me up in the kitchen and threw me over his shoulder.

‘No! No! I don’t want to!’ I screamed, as he dragged me off to his bedroom.

After a couple of hours when I came out the other men were in the kitchen. These men were speed addicts, but they worked for a computer company. Now, they seemed to be waiting for me.

‘Please, Lesley,’ one of them whispered. ‘Give us your parents’ address so that we can contact them. They might come and get you.’ He kept his voice quiet. ‘He could kill you, and we can’t let this go on any more.’

He held out a piece of paper and pen. I hesitated because I was afraid and I didn't know what to do, but his words brought the reality home to me: I was in danger. I gave them the address.

A couple of days later, early in the morning, three police cars arrived outside the house. A number of police officers, including my cousin who was in the force, knocked on the door. My father was with them.

The man told me to wait inside while he spoke to them at the door. He let Dad in though. He came into the kitchen and just sat on the chair in silence. Then he said to me, 'Weren't you afraid of getting pregnant?' He thought I had been a willing part of this nightmare.

Negotiations continued outside. The police threatened my captor with all sorts of charges unless he let me go. He did. Dad took me back to my cousin's and then back to the battleground of our home. I never saw that man again.



THE DAY I WAS RESCUED

Back at work in the factory at Woy Woy, I could see my life reflected in the never-ending rotation of the gusset steam machine. Without having to think, my body robotically worked the machine. Off with the gusset... on with the gusset... off with the gusset...

My soul was suffocating and my mind dying. The louvres next to me opened to let in a gentle breeze. It circulated around me and then played with the leaves of the wattles. Outside was freedom.

There must be more to life, I thought and felt. I have to get away from here.

My brother had moved to Sydney but in Woy Woy nothing had changed. Mum was still spending Saturday mornings at the new pub and Saturday afternoons at the old one. Sometimes she did the dance of the seven veils to entertain her friends. She would then go off to the big club at night and find a dance partner before she came home and cried herself to sleep. Dad played bowls all day Saturday. He told me he hated his house.

One night in bed, I could hear Mum crying out for my brother. 'Help me, somebody help me. Willy, Willy help me. I just want to die, why can't I die?' She cried and cried, repeating the same plea over and over.

Even though she was calling for my brother and not for me, her cries for help compelled me to go to her. Bravely I went into her room and offered myself.

'I'm here, Mum.'

'I don't want you,' she said, leaning up on her pillow. 'I want *my son!*' Her tear-streaked face twisted in hate as her words left her mouth and broke my heart.

I needed peace and calm in my life, I decided. The misery and chaos seemed to be coming from Mum and Dad and their terrible relationship, I thought to myself, so the only way to solve it was if I convinced my parents to separate.

One day when Mum was out, I used the opportunity to talk Dad into leaving.

Frankness was best, so I launched right in. ‘Dad, you know how unhappy you and Mum are? Don’t you think the best thing for you to do would be to leave?’ I said. ‘You make her unhappy and there is no peace here for anyone. All you do is fight—you have both been fighting for years. I think you should leave and give Mum some peace.’ I really believed I was right.

‘Come on.’ I called him into the bedroom. ‘Here’s your case. Pack some clothes and when we get to the train station, I will buy your ticket for you.’

He packed the brown suitcase and we headed off down the track. The train was expected soon so we had to hurry. When we made it down the 30 steps to the platform, I left Dad waiting while I bought his ticket. My heart was pumping with excitement. No more arguments to deal with!

It was a quiet afternoon with not many people about. As we waited, I could just hear the train coming over the bridge. ‘It’ll be here in a minute,’ I said, hoping he wasn’t going to change his mind. I could see the front of the train now and then, *oh, no!* I could hear Mum’s voice. She was running down the steps towards us. ‘Leo, Leo, don’t leave me, I love you.’

He dropped his case and started running towards her.

‘Silky, I love you, too,’ he crooned, as they embraced in front of me. I just stood in front of them in disbelief. I had done all this work and there would still be no peace.

‘I give up,’ I said, more to myself than anyone else; besides, they were too busy with each other to hear me. The train left the station and I left them with my heart still burdened by their marriage.

I felt lost and lonely. I didn’t fit in anywhere, I didn’t belong anywhere, and I didn’t seem to be able to solve my problems at home. Perhaps I

should try something entirely different, I thought, so the following Sunday night I decided to go to the local church. They ran a cafe for young people that I had heard about.

I showered and put on my favourite clothes: blue jeans, my gold, silver and red braided maroon army jacket and pink sandals. Finally, I had something to look forward to—or so I thought. By the time I walked the three miles to the Church it was dark. I stood in the doorway at the top of the stairs and looked around the inviting room. Coloured candles glowed on each table and the lights were turned down low. People my age were talking together in groups like old friends. I continued in and sat at a vacant table, waiting for someone to tell me what the ropes were here.

Soon, a man dressed in black with a white collar came over to me. ‘You can leave,’ he said. ‘We don’t have your sort here.’

I walked stiffly out, swallowing my tears not letting him see that I was hurt. I never went to that place again.

Chapter Six

An old popular, catchy song was going through my mind endlessly. The lyrics were repeating in my brain. *Hit the road. Hit the road. Hit the road.* I was seventeen and ready to go. That was the day I asked my brother if he could find me a place to live in Sydney. It didn't take him long to find something for me: a room in the top of a two-story terrace house in Woolloomooloo opposite Centennial Park.

'I'm moving out,' I told Mum and Dad.

I saw Mum swallow her emotions. 'Alright then, if your brother has found you a place,' she said, and she busied herself with sweeping the already-swept floor.

My new place was a long room with two sets of double-French doors that opened out onto a broken-down veranda overlooking the park. The only furnishings I owned were my sleeping bag and pillow.

The people who owned the Woy Woy factory also owned one in Sydney and I got a transfer there. My first Saturday morning was lovely and sunny. I decided to walk over to Centennial park and sit on the green grass just to be still. I held my face to the sun and closed my eyes, listening to the breeze

in the trees overhead. The scent of blossoms and mowed grass filled my lungs.

Suddenly a fat old man came around from behind the tree next to me. The front of his white overalls was open all the way down, and he had his hand on his penis. He foamed some mumbled words at me then disappeared behind the tree again. For a moment I couldn't believe what had just happened. Then panic sent me running back to my room, shaking all the way.

I didn't go back over to the park until mum came the next Saturday. We sat on the grass eating some sandwiches she had made for us for lunch. When we were finished, and she was satisfied that I had a place to live, she left for the Central Coast again. I didn't tell her about the man.

Life in Sydney was different from Woy Woy. For a start, I was the only Australian-born working in the factory. Even though I was an experienced machinist I was put on the belt machine that required no skill.

One day, when I went into the toilets a wall of black-clad women was waiting for me when I came out.

'How old are you?' The leader of the women looked young, but haggard.

'Seventeen.' I was surprised by the way they were all interested in me. I felt ganged up on.

'Are you married?'

'No,' I said, wondering what was going to happen next.

'Why not?' The leader of the group rose up so she was taller than me. 'I'm twenty-one and I'm married with six children.' Waving her hand and pointing to the small crowd, she said, 'All of us are young and married and have children. Why shouldn't you be married too?'

I just shrugged my shoulders. What could I say to her? She looked really bitter and I was sure that she hated me. One by one they turned and went back to their machines. I breathed relief but felt very sad. Even though the women were mean to me, I still walked the four miles to and from the factory along Oxford Street and worked with my head down.

I met Mick one afternoon as I was walking home from work. I was reading a palmistry book that belonged to my brother. I'd used it to read the palms of all 250 women in the Woy Woy factory, before I moved to Sydney. But now my attention was diverted from palm-reading to this gentle looking young man who came up beside me. He was tall, about 20 and had black hair and a beard that surrounded a lovely soft face and kind shiny brown eyes.

'Hi!' he smiled, leaning into my face. 'Where are you going and what's your name?' We exchanged names and I put my book away.

'Do you want to come to my place?' he asked. He seemed nice, so I said yes.

Mick showed me where he lived and invited me in. There was a single bed and a double bed in one room with a little kitchenette on one wall. A small, sandy-bearded man was seated on the floor. His legs were crossed and he had a long skinny pipe in his hand.

'This is Grey.'

Grey looked up at me, smiling and offered me the pipe. Cat Stevens was playing on the record player—about a girl leaving home. A sadness rose up in my heart but I didn't talk. Instead, I just got stoned.

As I was leaving, I noticed a pushbike at the front door. 'Can I borrow your bike?' I asked.

'Anytime,' Mick said.

Not long after that, one day when I turned up for work, the boss called me into his office straight away. He was a fat, dark-haired man, and was sitting behind his desk when I came to the door. 'Sit down,' he said. His hands were folded in his lap, and he leaned back slightly in his office chair. 'Do you smoke dope?' he asked.

'Yeah. So?'

'Right,' he said throwing his pen down on the desk. 'That's all I wanted to know. You can go now.'

As I arose and walked over to the door, suddenly he rushed around from behind his desk and slammed the door shut. He grabbed me in his fat arms and tried to kiss me on my mouth. I pushed hard against him and avoided his mouth by shaking my head. Just as quickly as he attacked me, he let me go. He opened the door. 'Get out!' There was loathing in his voice.

That night I went around to my brother's house and told him what had happened. The next morning when I turned up for work the boss called me into his office again, but this time he met me at the door. 'Your brother rang me this morning and threatened me,' he said. 'You're sacked. Leave now!'

I was in panic mode as I walked all the way back up Oxford Street, but I quickly forgot my troubles when I found an old lady in a dirty blue coat begging on the footpath. She looked at me through long strands of unwashed grey hair. 'Got a few dollars, luv?' she asked, holding her hand out to me.

'Come with me,' I invited her. She scrambled to her feet with her rough hand in mine. We walked to the door of my place and went up the stairs into my empty room.

'Here, lay down and I'll make you some food,' I said. She struggled to get in my sleeping bag, and made herself comfortable with my pillow. As I

turned to leave the room, she smiled like a Cheshire cat. 'Thank you, dear.'

I made her a meal of bacon and fried eggs with toast and took it up to her. She quickly got stuck into it and then I brought up a cup of tea. I was making myself a cup of tea when the people I rented the room from came home. My landlord walked in and screwed up his nose. 'Oh! What's that smell?

'I brought an old lady home who was begging,' I told him. I thought they would be glad to help her.

'What?'

'And I lost my job today.'

He got really angry. 'You lost your job! Then you can't pay your rent and you can't bring beggars into our house. Take her now and leave.'

I went upstairs very sad that I had to tell the old lady she had to go. We walked down the stairs together, me carrying my (now smelly) sleeping bag and she in her stinking blue coat.

Out on the street she turned to me before she walked away and said, 'Oh well dear, you tried.'

The day was passing, and soon chilled air crept over my shoulders. The night was getting blacker. 'I needed to find somewhere to hide,' I thought, so I aimed for the bush inside the Park opposite. I walked as far as I could, all the while looking in every direction, making sure no one could see or follow me. After brushing through some tree branches, I was stopped by a huge log. "This will be safe," I thought. I lay down in my sleeping bag trying to breathe through its terrible odour.

The next morning, I woke up in a fright. The sun was high in the sky. I was in the middle of a grassed area where families were playing ball games around me. I felt really embarrassed, picking up my sleeping bag and slinking away trying not to be noticed.

I walked straight to my brother's house about three miles away. It was a little weatherboard house, tucked away down a side street in Paddington. The little kitchen had an upside-down television on one wall and a big blackboard on the other. Under the beach umbrella, the kitchen table was covered in ashtrays, candles and matchboxes. No one was around so I wrote in big letters on the blackboard: *Brother, I have nowhere to live.*

I kept following the road down to Kings Cross and sat on a seat on the footpath watching all the people walking up and down. Two kids about fifteen years old sat down next to me.

'How ya goin?' the girl asked. I told her I didn't have anywhere to live. 'Neither do we,' she said. 'This is my brother and we don't have any parents 'n no one to tell us what to do. C'mon, we'll take 'ya to the Orange room—that's where we've been sleeping. They 'av plenty of space, they don't ask questions 'n it's free!'

It was growing dark as we started walking. 'Here have some of this.' She tipped some pills into her brother's hand and one into mine. 'It's speed, we take it all the time 'n it's really good.'

I swallowed the small pill believing what she said, that it would be fun, but as it took effect the people in the street looked freaky to me, like cellophane puppets. I didn't like what I was experiencing. On the way we walked up a side ally, passing an old man. Suddenly the kids jumped on him, punching him to the ground. The old man groaned in pain and begged them, 'Please don't hurt me.'

Their action shocked me. 'Stop! You can't do that, stop!' I yelled at them. I pulled them away from him and stood between them. Surprisingly, they stopped. 'Give him back his wallet,' I demanded. Surprisingly, again, they did.

They walked off leaving me with the hunched over old man. 'Thank you, thank you,' he kept repeating as he put his wallet back into the pocket of his long brown coat.

I made my way to the main street of Kings Cross, which had come alive with all strange and weird forms of human beings. I found the Orange Room which was a space for the lost and homeless. It was run by The Wayside Chapel. Its steep staircase led up to a large, open attic-type room covered in mattresses, blankets and pillows. I found a corner to lay down and hide myself out of the way and feel safe falling into a deep sleep.

Next morning, I was wandering and wondering what to do as I walked up Oxford Street when a group of really happy girls came up beside me. 'Hey! Where are you going?' they smiled.

'Nowhere,' I said sadly.

'Come on then, you can come and hang with us.'

I walked all the way to Bondi with them, listening to their happy exchanges until we came to their house. 'Come in, you can stay here with us,' they assured me. 'There's plenty of room in the lounge room.'

There was a block of hash on the table, and they said I could have whatever I wanted. That night we all went to a nightclub in Oxford Street. I had never been to one before, so I wasn't sure what to do. 'Just enjoy yourself,' they explained as they paired off and blended into the crowd, with drinks. I copied what they did.

A young guy with hair like Jimmy Hendrix came over and made himself very friendly to me. We easily got along so when he invited me back to his place for a joint, I went. We got straight into his bed and he lit up a joint. It was strong, so much so, that I didn't realise for a while that he was penetrating me. Quickly, I passed out.

Very early the next morning all the girls came into his room to talk to me. 'Quick! Come on!' They urged me to leave him immediately. 'Come with us now, you don't belong here.' He begged me to stay but I followed what the girls said and left with them.

I answered an advertisement in the paper for artists models and fortunately got some work for a group of artists at Mosman for a couple of weeks. It gave me some money for food and I was able to open up a bank account with \$1 at the Commonwealth Bank in Bondi.⁵

Back at the girls' place we smoked some hash that had been soaked in opium. It was nearly night and time for them to go night-clubbing again. They left me alone sitting on the lounge room floor, so I decided to walk to my brother's again and remind him that I didn't have anywhere to live.

As I started the long walk back to Paddington the dope started to affect me more and more. A large park, planted with giant old figs, bordered the part of the road I was walking along when some ambulances came screaming down the street past me. As they passed, I felt like I was going to lose my mind and freak out with the noise. The nature of the park reached out; I felt it envelop me, drawing me into its safety. When the ambulances had gone on down the road, I found myself standing next to the trunk of a big twisted tree. I wanted to say thank you to it for helping me, but the tree was really grumpy. I could tell that all the trees were unhappy, stuck near the traffic all their existence; they didn't like that.

My need to find a place to stay led me back to Mick and Grey's. 'Come in,' Mick said, with a wide smile as if he had just won a prize.

I spent my time over the next few days getting stoned at Mick's, riding his bike over to my brother's and waiting in the kitchen, getting stoned there and riding back. My brother never seemed to be around, but I still sat on a chair, just outside the circle of people sharing a joint as it was passed

around the kitchen table. They appeared to be consciously sharing thoughts, just sitting with their eyes closed, not talking but with their minds communing. I knew if I waited long enough the joint would come my way. After I was high, my favourite thing to do, was ride around the back streets in the dark, listening to the rhythmic *clackity-click, clackity-click, clackity-click* of the wheels going around, pretending I was on a train. It was soothingly lovely, gliding along to the gentle clicking of the bike.

One night after a smoke of black hash Mick, Grey and I set off for the Arts Factory⁶. This building was a huge warehouse divided into two areas. Three quarters of the floor was covered with carpets of all descriptions, while stalls lined the other wall. There was a stage at the end where a man used an overhead projector, a clear glass bowl and some oil colours mixed with water to create a light show. The stalls were draped in dark curtains; on the tables were all manner of candles, incense holders, mirrored cushions and implements used for smoking dope. All were offered for sale. The women selling them were dressed in witches' garb. As bodies floated in and seated themselves in groups on the floor, the air quickly thickened with the smoke from incense, hash, candle fumes and patchouli oil.

When the night came to life, psychedelic coloured patterns swept over the ceiling and stage. The lights from candles flickered in time to the beat of the music, reflecting off the blissed-out faces of stoned people.

Everyone was watching the Band bashing out their hearts on stage. My eyes settled on a boy playing violin with them. He had a head full of golden curls that made him appear like an angel to me. I wondered what a child was doing with them. I began to feel free and peaceful, willing to go swimming with my mind in this dark sea of people unified by unlimited access to the cosmos. We all thought it was the Age of Aquarius.

I also started to feel safe at Mick's place. He fed me, was kind to me, and didn't make me think of sex or put any pressure on me. Then, one night after dinner and a strong smoke he, did something he hadn't done for me before, he ran a bath.

'Come on, have a bath with me,' He said, with a warm smile.

As he was preparing it, I slowly took my clothes off; fear began to creep through my exposed flesh. When I stepped into the tub full of warm water, I sat cringing, at one end, wishing it was full enough to hid my body in. I felt skinny, sexless and afraid; exposed. He continued smiling at me and I could see he was trying not to frighten me as he sat in the other end of the bath. He reached over and began to untie to my arms that were wrapped around my drawn-up knees. They wouldn't let go of their grip. I didn't know what I should be doing; I wanted this moment to go away. I felt my very soul was naked before him.

'It's okay.' He spoke softly to reassure me. The realisation must have come to him through how terrified I looked that there was something wrong. He handed me a towel and said gently, 'Don't be frightened, here is a towel, hope out and get dressed.'

Later that night Grey's girlfriend came home after being away for some time. I had never met her. She was very slim and graceful with a beautiful, gentle face and bright, clear, blue eyes. Those eyes looked in surprise at me sitting on Mick's bed.

'What's she doing here?' she asked, turning to Grey.

'She's staying here for a while with Mick,' he said, trying to explain me away.

'What?' she demanded, with controlling authority. 'She's just a child. She can't stay here. She has to leave now.'

Mick and Grey bowed to her will. 'Sorry, Lesley, you'll have to go,' they told me, without looking me in the eyes.

A feeling of abandonment and being unloved doesn't come near to how I felt as I gathered up my few things and stepped out of their front door. I left the bike there this time and turned to brave whatever was going to befall me. I headed for my brother's house.

Chapter Seven

It was dark when I arrived but this time, he was home. When I asked him about a place to stay, he said, 'You can stay in my old room up here,' and led up the hall into a small room painted completely with royal blue walls and a green floor. A big, round, paper, egg-yolk coloured light shade hung from the centre of the ceiling like the sun. There was also a bed and an old, pump-action church organ that I soon played endlessly

As he kissed me good-by he said, 'I'm going somewhere else you will be alright here.'

I laid down on the bare mattress. My sleeping bag had *let go* of the last of the stench from the homeless woman. The blue of the room, like the sky just before sunset, made me feel safe and peaceful and I felt close to my brother because I was in his old room. I could finally rest.

My brother's room was in an old weatherboard cottage. Around it was five other dwellings; it and one other faced onto a lane. These two houses were shared by friends who played together in different bands.

I never thought of my parents while I stayed here. I didn't have a job drifting along like a child with whatever was happening around me, filling

in my days by painting a green vine. It started at the front door, went along the floor of the hallway and up every door then out to the back veranda. It had beautiful leaves gracefully growing all along its stem.

A man called Karl and his girlfriend lived in the other room of the cottage. Not long after I moved in, they were in the middle of an argument early one morning when suddenly their door flew open. The girlfriend came out with her bags and left in a taxi. I never saw her again.

Karl was tall and slim, with long, dark, wiry hair and a long, straggly beard. A few weeks after I had moved in, he was leaning over the stove one day.

‘I’ll show you how to cook brown rice,’ he told me. ‘You need to use lots of oil and brown the rice like this, then dice up some carrots like this.’ He cut up the carrots, and put them in. ‘Now pour some soya sauce on like this.’ He stirred the food in the pan. ‘More oil and a drop of water.’

It looked nice. He placed two plates of food in front of us and when we began to eat, he started opening up.

‘I’m really depressed.’ His head was down, staring at his food. ‘My girlfriend has left me. I feel like committing suicide.’

I didn’t think it was unusual to be depressed, or to want to take your life, but I thought it was different that he talked about his feelings.

‘That’s sad,’ I told him. ‘You’ll find another girlfriend and cook for her.’

He kept talking like that for a couple of days and cooking food for me. I just kept listening. After about a week he said, over fried eggs, ‘You’ve saved me from my depression. I don’t want to take my life now.’

I felt quite cheered up inside that someone had changed their mind about taking their life but I didn’t understand how I had any influence over his decision.

I began to become part of my brother's circle of friends in this small community though I hardly ever saw him. They smoked a lot of dope—Karl would often hand out little squares of blotting paper with LSD absorbed into them—and talked a lot about spiritual stuff.

My brother came in one night with his girlfriend and he seemed really upset. I was sitting at the table with them and the golden-haired violinist boy called John (who lived in the other house.) My brother started to tell us about his problem, which was that his girlfriend's mother was a black witch.

'She doesn't want us to be together,' he said. 'Last night she sent an evil spirit and it threw me around the room. She's told me to stay away from her daughter.' He was shaking slightly and holding his girlfriend's hand tightly in his. 'I'm trying to persuade her not to be a black witch like her mother.'

For them a good joint helped put everything into perspective; *they thought*.

Later that night, my brother asked his girlfriend if she would read my Tarot cards. Reading Tarot cards was not considered black magic by them. I sat down with her at a small table. One by one she placed a card on the table and turned it over, but her relaxed expression on her face turned to dismay.

'Oh, no!'

'What?' I asked

She turned over another card. 'Whatever you do, don't get married.'

Then she slowly turned over another. '*And...* whatever you do, don't have any children.'

Another card revealed something else to her that made her speak to me in a more urgent tone. 'There's a man, he's really strange. Watch him. Watch him!'

‘Will I get to where I want to go?’ I asked, but I didn’t know why the question came out of my mouth.

‘Yes, you’ll get there, just don’t get married and don’t have any children,’ she said. ‘Whatever you do, just look after yourself.’ She turned to my brother and leaving the room with him I heard her say, ‘That’s the strangest life path I’ve ever seen.’⁷

That night, John, another girl, Karl and I were sitting at the kitchen table. We had just finished dinner when I began to feel really sleepy. I put my head on my arms on the table, vaguely noticing that the others were exiting in a hurry, leaving only Karl. I was nearly overcome by drowsiness and the room became thick and heavy, when Karl called out to me. ‘Quick! Get up and sit with your legs crossed and think of something beautiful.’ His voice had urgency in it. ‘There’s an evil spirit trying to possess us.’

I jumped up on the seat and closed my eyes, imagining a beautiful white flower, growing and alive, filled with brightness. The thick presence dissipated after a few minutes. Karl stood up and was visibly shaken but I wasn’t afraid. Just then John came into the room and Karl told him what had happened. John said, ‘That came because of me.’ He didn’t explain any further.

Not long after that, Karl received an eviction notice and burned all the rubbish and dead plants in the garden on a big bonfire in the backyard. Of course, I now had nowhere to live, so Karl told me to go down and stay on the lounge of the house where John lived.

John had the front room of this house. He ruled the roost along with a guy who lived out back in a small room off the house. A plump, sixteen-year-old boy, ‘Norbert from Orbit’ slept on one of the couches. He never spoke, just lay there all day and night, eating food and smoking joints as they came around, never saying thank you. I took the other couch.

One of the girls in our circle invited me to come up to a farm with her at Ourimbah, where her boyfriend lived. We got a lift with the guy who owned the farm, travelling in the back of his van. While we were driving along, he handed us a joint of Acapulco Gold. The dope made it seem like a very long journey.

The farmhouse was large with six bedrooms and a huge lounge room, filled with musical instruments. Its bay windows looked out over a green paddock circled by tall trees.

I was the youngest of our group that hung out together, circulating between the house, the Arts Factory and the farm. When we were at the farm, we collected Blue Meanies every morning and made mushroom soup. We were stoned all the time.

On one of the beautiful mornings I walked by myself up to the top of the hill that overlooked the surrounding farmland. I stripped my clothes off and opened my arms to the sky, bearing my whole body to fresh air and the warmth of the sun. My skin breathed, I let everything go; my mind was clear and clean like a child. After absorbing myself in this new, free, feeling for some time I walked down the hill naked towards the others sitting on the grass together. They were used to not wearing clothes but for me it was the first time.

The man who owned the farm was sitting there with them.

‘What’s happened to you?’ he asked, with a delighted expression on his face. He took me into his room, laid me down and entered my body without saying a word to me. I let him in; I thought that was what I was supposed to do. Afterwards, he sat on the bed with his hands in the air saying, ‘Look at the electricity!’

‘What a strange man,’ I thought, laying there. I was expecting some affection from him, but he was too engrossed in himself.

One weekend, my friend and I lay down in the long green soft grass of the paddock. The sky was milky blue, and the insects did their insecty things, making little buzzing's. Birds sang happy songs for the perfect day. We rested, we slept, we were alone, and we were safe.

The chill of the setting sun woke us, and we walked into the house. Everyone was in the music room sitting in the dark with just the starlight shining through the bay windows. We all sat on the floor making sounds. One by one, noises of animals or frogs or birdcalls filled the room and brought the earth to life in our hearts. All was good.

Most people staying in the house slept on the lounge room floor, including me and my friend, who had just been dumped by her boyfriend, and was very sad. An older man who hung around us just watching everyone and not talking to any one sat near us while we were sleeping and stared for hours. Eventually my friend couldn't take it any longer. She looked up from her pillow and said, 'Go away! Just go away. She's not interested in you.'

When he answered his voice was rough but gentle. Looking at me, he said, 'You are like a washed sheet hung out on the line in the sunshine, white and clean.'

I kept my head down. I felt guilty that a kind man might have been hurt by my friend's words and, anyway, I didn't feel clean.

The next weekend was the Moon Festival. Australian bands took their turn to play on the makeshift stage and I lost myself in the sea of stoned hippies who passed around LSD and joints that had no beginnings and no ending. I wore a multicoloured silk kimono, floating between centuries, colours flying in the air. Joints passed from lips to hands to lips and then on passing to and by me in every direction. I sucked in deeply every one of

them, and saw a mighty twelfth century castle rising up over us, there, and then not there.

Everyone was waiting for a man to come on stage and speak; they said he was a prophet. I didn't know who or what that was, but I did hear him say, "Shape up or ship out". Even though it sounded like an urgent message, it didn't mean much to me; I thought I was already shipped out.

Back at Paddington I still had my place on the couch, which was where I was sitting when John opened his bedroom door one day and announced that he was going out.

'No one is to go into my room,' he told us, 'and no one is to especially touch this.' He held up a bit of metal about seven inches long and two inches round. It was a brown grey colour with ridges all over it. 'It has power and it can hurt you.'

'Okay,' everyone said, and agreed not to touch it.

"Aha," I thought, and waited until John had gone out, and no one was looking. Slowly sliding across the room, I opened his door and slipped in. There it was, lying on the shelf next to some books. "Hmmm," I thought. "Why can't we touch it?"

I reached out to place my finger on it and as I did, I was thrown back a step or two by an electric shock. It was similar to those I sometimes got off faulty sewing machines. I immediately felt guilty, but not frightened and snuck back to my couch and kept quiet about it.

When John came home and went into his room, he came out straight away.

'Who touched this?' he asked everyone, showing us the metal object. I looked down because I could feel my face turning red with guilt, but I didn't confess.

I was on the couch one night when I started having a particularly heavy period. The pain was unbearable, and I began bleeding more and more heavily until blood was pouring out of me. There was only one other person in the house at the time. It was a man who just happened to be there because he was waiting for somebody. When he saw me screaming in pain and I told him I was haemorrhaging he whisked me up the hospital.

Two nurses took me away to look after me—or so I thought. They placed me in an open shower, took my clothes off and sprayed me with a high-powered hose. I was losing blood clots and sitting in the corner of the shower when they started to interrogate and grill me.

‘What drugs are you on?’ asked one.

‘You probably have lice. You’re a disgrace.’

The questions went on for fifteen minutes until one of them handed me a hospital gown and a pad. ‘Put these on,’ she said.

As soon as I was dressed they took me back to the man who had helped me. I was crying as I told him what they did to me. He took my arm and led me back to his car. ‘Nasty people,’ he mumbled under his breath. ‘@\$ #% nasty.’



John had a hole in the knee of his jeans and because I could sew, I mended it for him. He held the jeans in his hands studying the stitches before he burst out saying, ‘The person who sewed this really cares.’

I thought, ‘It was just a patch.’

He went into his room and came out with a string of pearls. ‘I would like to give you these,’ he said, and put them around my neck.

The next thing I knew, we were an item and I was sleeping in his room. He made a heart shape out of red cardboard, wrote on it “God bless us” and then stuck it on the wall at the head of our big, brown wooden bed.

For a while it felt as if my life was filled with magic, golden summer rain. I danced around the streets playing a timbral in a white, torn up sheet and bells around my ankles, like the character in the nursery rhyme.

*“With bells on her fingers and rings on her toes
She shall have music wherever she goes.”*

John played a few gigs around the pubs in Sydney at this time. One of the bands he got together was called Shot-Gun-Logic in which I played the tambourine. We got a gig as the support band for Daddy Cool when they played at the Sydney Town Hall. As we were waiting to go on our singer was really stressing and arguing with everyone. I had no idea what he was talking about, but didn’t worry about it, because we were finally being ushered onto the stage. I wore a tie-dyed singlet with a long Indian skirt that flowed gracefully around my body when I moved. The stage lights were shining on us. Two levels seated hundreds of young voices, cheering, smiling and waving their arms at us. I could feel their good vibes; they were like a strong wind, hitting my soul, urging us to play.

We were about one minute into our song when the singer fell to the floor and started wriggling, arching his back and frothing at the mouth. The audience yelled louder with delight. John, somehow knowing what was happening, went over to him and waited until he stopped writhing. Ushers took us off the stage into the room beneath, where John continued to look after the singer.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ I asked.

‘He’s had a fit,’ John said to me. ‘That’s the end of that.’ And he took my hand and lead me angrily out of the Town Hall.

When we all got stoned, we discussed questions like, was Timothy Leary really dead? What were the seven veils of Madam Blavatsky? Was there a serpent coiled under every rose? We listened to Buffy Sainte-Marie's songs over and over again. "*God, Magic, God Magic, God Magic....*"

Strong dope seemed to be the way to God and we all smoked heavily every night and day. I couldn't speak when I smoked. I had no confidence; most of the time I couldn't even stand up. I saw peoples' spirits and heard people thinking. I knew who was coming to the door before they knocked. If some danger was going to happen I would tell people before it happened.

One day the man who had stared at me and told me I was like a white sheet came to our place. He asked me if I wanted to join a Pentecostal church and said something about the Holy Spirit.

I didn't know what the Holy Spirit was, so I said, 'No, I'm not interested.' The pull of the stoned life was too strong for me.

He seemed really concerned for me and left with his head down, but he gave me a niggling feeling inside my heart, that I was living a wrong life.



John's best friend, Sam, gave him \$1000 every year. Sam's father owned a big company in Scotland and gave him an allowance of \$3000 that he always shared with his friends.

This time, when Sam gave him the money, John went out and bought a tent and a box of food.

'Come on,' he said to me. 'My sister said we can build a house on her block of land in the Hunter Valley.' It was an opportunity to leave his life of

magic and move to the country. He began to explain to me about the wand and why he had it.

‘When I was a boy I was woken up by a light in my room. When I sat up in bed an old man was standing there holding this wand. He said it was mine then disappeared leaving the wand on the end of my bed. When I was older, I got involve in the black and white magic wars in Sydney.’ He looked at me more intensely, ‘I’m a white Magician but I want to give it all up. I’ve seen too many people hurt.’

I listened and believed every word he said because he spoke so sincerely.

It was a beautiful bright summery day, he was full of hope and now I belonged somewhere, with a future. After packing our supplies and clearing out our room, we jumped into his ute and took off down Moore Park Road, on our way out of Sydney.

But we didn’t get far.

‘What’s that?’ John said. ‘Those two black cars.’

Sure enough, there were two cars following us, and John began to panic. One of the cars came up on our right side and a man signalled for us to pull over. As John pulled to the side of the road, men in police uniforms got out of their car in front of us. John threw his small block of black hash out of his window as far as he could.

The police came around to each side of our Ute and opened our doors.

‘Get out, you two.’

As I stepped out onto the curb, my foot caught the hem of my long skirt pulling the top of it off my waist and down over my bare thigh.

‘Ah, look at that, you slut,’ said the policeman. ‘You don’t even wear any underwear.’

I felt totally embarrassed and gathered up my skirt quickly, but by the time I looked around for John, he was in the back of one of their cars, being driven away.

The police sat me in the back of their other car and started driving. I was scared. They didn't talk to me or tell me where they were taking me. Finally, we came to the Sydney Police Station and they stood me in a small cubicle in the corner of the room. All the officers were drunk, sitting around on chairs and tables and laughing and joking about all the horrible things they could do to me.

'What kind of girl are you?'

'Just a slut prostitute.'

'You're a filthy little slut.'

'No underwear to make it easy, eh?'

I looked around the room at their drunken red faces; their words were physically hitting me, I felt sick, afraid, cheap and vulnerable.

I was put into a cell that had a hard bed and no windows. All night I sat staring into the dark, worried about what had happened to John and what they were going to do to me.

The next morning, I was taken into a courtroom, where, to my surprise, both my parents were waiting for me. They came straight up to me and held my hands.

The judge charged me with "Being in Moral Danger" and committed me into my parents' care, placing me on a three-month bond until I was 18.



When I was taken back to my parents' house I moved into my brother's old room because I liked his aqua painted walls better than the pink walls in

my old room. I had an old typewriter and John's tape recorder that had two big reels. It had the musical of Alice in Wonderland on it.

I was intolerably depressed. I filled my lonely days writing poetry.

Sinking down

To the ground

Everyone lost

In a sea of mud

There is no change

All the same

Dying crying lying

No pity in this

City

Life with Mum and Dad was still the same; the same old arguments over and over, every night. During one of them, Dad opened his shirt to reveal some bandages.

'This is where you stabbed me five times, remember?' he yelled at Mum.

'Yeah, well you could've died for all I care,' she growled back, and with that he went out.

I went into the kitchen to get a drink of water when I caught Mum going through the drug cupboard, reading the labels on the bottles.

'I've had enough,' she said. 'That bastard. It's all his fault, with his drinking and gambling.'

She had a handful of pills that were about to go into her mouth when she dropped them. They fell all over the floor and she immediately started trying to pick them up. I quickly stomped on as many as I could so that she couldn't take any, but with her left hand she whipped a knife out of the drawer. She shoved it in front of me and bent over in an attack position.

‘You bitch,’ she said. ‘How dare you. I’ll run this knife through you; get away from those tablets.’ Hate and loathing filled her face, and her brown eyes flashed with threats. I stopped crushing the pills under my shoes, stepping back to a safe distance from her insanity. I kept walking until I was out the door.

The next morning, I wrote a letter to the house in Paddington asking for John to come and get me. I received a letter back instructing me to be home at 3pm; Sam would pick me up in the kombi van.

I fled in our friend’s car in broad daylight. My heart was pounding as we drove away. I was breaking my bond, and the police would be after me. If they caught me they would put me in jail.

When I walked into the lounge room in Paddington John was sitting on the couch smoking a joint—and not as pleased to see me as I thought.

‘I had to pay a lot of money in a fine,’ he told me. ‘The cops took me back to our room and one of them got some dope out of his pocket and put it into the wardrobe, then said, “Look what I found?” Then they took me to a house somewhere in the country and molested me. They threatened to hurt you if I didn’t sign a confession to having a stash of drugs.’

He then told me that the man who owned the house I had painted the vine in was mates with the police. ‘Apparently in the pub he asked them to “take care” of the hippies living in his houses,’ he told me. John was sad and I was scared stiff that the police were going to turn up any minute. I cut my hair and put bleach through it, turning it white.

That same day we were all sitting around the lounge room when my dad appeared in the doorway! I could have died; everyone else looked as shocked as I felt.

Dad sat down beside me and looked at my new hairdo. ‘I always thought it would suit you,’ he said. ‘And I can always find you. I just wanted

to see that you were all right.' He didn't say anything else or stay much longer before he just left, probably to go to the races nearby.

We still had to get away from the police, in case they were looking for us, so early the next morning John hurriedly loaded the ute with supplies, trying again to get to his sister's land. As the busy city roads shrank behind us, we soon found ourselves on a quiet, narrow, winding road, framed by green sloping hills. A continuing line of native willow trees hid a little freshwater stream as it flowed along the meandering valley floor. The sun was high and warm when we pulled in to the unfenced block of land. There was not a building or a soul in sight—just the occasional lowing of black and white milking cows which were grazing on a hilly paddock the other side of the stream.

I rested on the grass while John set up the tent and organised a small fireplace for the billy. As we sat together on the ground with a cup of tea, he tapped out his pipe on his shoe and replenished it with fresh tobacco. After a while he broke the silence.

'There's no thoughts floating around here,' he said.

I didn't understand what he meant and immediately thought, "I hope I don't have any."

That night we went to bed in our white tent with the sunset because we didn't have any lamps or candles. The next morning, in the microseconds just before waking up, I saw a light all around my mind. Staying still, I woke up properly to see that John had his hand above and over my head. I thought he was trying to clean my mind while I was asleep. I didn't ask him about it, though; I just pretended I didn't notice anything and acted normal. He got up and picked up a trowel then walked a little further away.

'This is where we will build our house,' he said. He dug a little hole and buried his wand, covering it completely over.

I didn't think of the practicalities of building a house, like where we would get the money to buy the things we needed, or how we would get food to eat as we were doing it, but John was a very confident boy who seemed to always know the next move to make, even though he was only eighteen.

'We'll go back to the city,' he decided. He could get into a band and earn some money, and we would try to avoid the police, although we were both nervous about them coming to get us.

John had a friend who said we could stay at a house opposite the University of NSW, so we put a mattress with an electric blanket in the cupboard under the stairs and slept there. (At that time, I was suffering from awful pains in my pelvis caused from a small prolapse of my womb so we went looking and found an herbalist, who gave me a bottle of medicine. It was horrible, but it healed me.)

Again, we were looking for ways to make some quick money, and John thought it would be a good idea to advertise me as a model. The plan was to let a photographer pay to take photos of me in one of the bedrooms. The same day that John put an advert on the Uni notice board, a man turned up with all his photography equipment. I went up to the bedroom with him while John waited downstairs. The man kept trying to manoeuvre me into positions where he could take photos of my private parts. I felt uncomfortable and refused to do what he subtly asked until he got cranky and started packing up his equipment. I felt upset, as if I had been violated. I walked down the stairs and told John what he was trying to get me to do.

'Well, we won't do that again,' he said. He was angry that it had turned out that way. It seemed too hard to get the money together to get away and have a new start, until we met a student who was the son of one of the Directors of BHP.

We met him in the lounge room of the house we were staying in. Lots of students came together there, to play music and smoke a few joints. This guy started talking excitedly about some land he knew of.

‘It’s for sale. Great land, away from anywhere,’ he told us. ‘We should all buy in.’ He gave us a map which showed 535 acres of land down in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, and everyone began to talk about it.

The people in the house that evening came from all over: New South Wales, Victoria and Adelaide in South Australia, and the conversation gave John another idea.

‘Is there a place down your way we could stay for a while?’ he asked the guys from Adelaide. *This would be a good way to get out of town and avoid the cops plus perhaps he could get into the music scene*, he thought. One of the men, a quiet and friendly guy called Mel, gave us his address.

‘Come on down,’ he told us. ‘You can stay with me.’

Chapter Eight

It was a new start for us.

Armed with the map and our few meagre possessions we set off with one of the other Prospective buyers, called Phil. The plan was to check out the land and then continue down to Adelaide.

The drive down took all day and late into the night. Gradually I saw a cold grey light from the rising moon illuminating the trunks of the twisted trees along the dirt road. Millions of stars twinkled in the galaxy above us. Branches of old gums with shredding bark draped down over the road, as if they were intending to grab us and prevent us from entering.

I lay on the back seat of the little VW Beetle, looking up through the car window, catching glimpses of the big white moon who revealed himself only when he chose to come out from behind the overhanging trees. The colourless light appeared to be in conspiracy with the trees, making our welcome as spooky as possible. But I wasn't afraid, I had accepted my fate! I knew I had no other choice but to come to this place. As we drove on and on, deeper into the mountains, the vegetation became larger, darker and

denser. I didn't know where I was going, and I didn't mind; just as long as it was far away from anywhere that I had been before.

Up, up and up we climbed, the little engine straining to meet the challenge of the terrain. Finally, we came close to the top of the steep ascent when the car made a noise. *Crunch!* The wheels of the car kept spinning but we did not move.

'Great!' said John. The boys got out and found the sump of the car stuck on top of a boulder. I watched as they used sticks to chock the wheels and lift the car off the very large rock, and got us going again.

From here the road continued on level ground, soft fine sand, lit up by the moonlight in front of us. It looked like two white ribbons, leading us smoothly and quietly along.

'I think this is it,' said John when we came to an old rusty farm gate. He got out and dragged it open, over the soft gravelly ground. He resumed his seat, and we drove around a bend and straight along for a few yards before stopping in front of an old shed, standing alone under a canopy of stars, lit up silver grey by the moonlight.

I stepped out of the car into a new kind of darkness. I had never experienced anything like it before. It was richly, abundantly alive, with strange sounds of animals moving, bounding and munching. Little shadows darted here and there, scurrying away from us in all directions. Light from the stars and moon spread over the rugged countryside, lighting up white boulders of rocks and reflecting off the leaves of the Silver Wattles. Slowly and deeply I took a breath in and out.

'Mmm,' I said. The air was thick with the smells of blossoms, wattles, gum trees and dusty earth.

We organized candles and then cleared spaces on the roughly hewn wooden floor of the old shed. We spread out our sleeping bags and lay

down to sleep. I drifted off to the songs of Mopokes and the calls of other animals, grazing and moving through the night.

The coming of dawn gave birth to an innumerable variety of birdcalls, their music filling from the earth to heaven. All the land sang as one body alive with moving, rushing, busying, flying, animals and insects. Their din was like an orchestra tuning up before a performance. The sounds were almost deafening.

The old shed had two rooms; one held an old, broken-down Ferguson tractor while the other had the floor and three walls. The plan was to “lie low” here away from anywhere hoping that the Police would forget about us.

There was a small, bent, water tank on one wall that collected a few drips from the rusty, half-falling-down guttering. John managed to get a fire going on the ground outside and heated some baked beans. We ate them hungrily and then drove the 12 miles into the nearest town to get some stores.

As we drove back along the same road, we came to the top of the descent where the big boulder was. We were amazed at the size of what had nearly taken the bottom out of the car. This time, in the light of day, we could appreciate the beauty of the wilderness that was going to be our home. Stringy Bark trees and tall Peppermint Gums lined the road and formed a canopy for the thick Tea Trees and Black Wattle undergrowth.

When we pulled up in front of the only store in the little town, we saw an ancient looking man on a horse trotting away with his mail. Sitting on a bench-seat near the doorway was another round old man, keen to warn us about the fires that were around the area.

‘Will we be okay out there?’ John asked him, pointing up to the mountains.

The man seemed to take pleasure in the concerned looks on our faces. He leant over and placed his pipe in the corner of his mouth. He took a long, slow draw before leaning back and blowing the smoke up into the air. It slowly drifted away into the heat-filled morning.

‘You’ll be all right if tha’ wind don’t change,’ he drawled at last. ‘The last family that lived out that-a-way was boiled alive in tha water tank try’n ta escape the fires 50 years ago.’

It was dark by the time we got back to the shed, so we lit a fire to cook some sausages before saying good-bye to our friend. He was driving back to Sydney, but would return in one month and take us onto Adelaide.

Over the next couple of days John explored the land, looking for the best place to build a cabin. Eventually, he chose a small valley over the mountain behind the shed.

‘It’s out of the way,’ he said. ‘No one will find us there.’

I tried to walk up the mountain the steep way to see John’s chosen site, but I could only go a couple yards at a time. I felt so weak and dizzy every time I lifted my legs to take another step. It took me a whole day to get as far as the top. I had nearly reached it, just as it was getting dark, and had to come down again. The next day I made it right up and John took me around the contour of the mountain to the little valley.

At night we filled in the time playing chess and drinking tea. I was reading Lord of the Rings, and John played music on his guitar. I liked the sound of my boots on the old shed’s wooden floor. I imagined I was a cowgirl waiting to ride my horse. I felt tough and free. Of course, at the same time I was still scared at the thought of the police possibly coming for us. Even though we were out of Sydney, we always felt like we had to be on our guard.

Because we didn't have a radio, or a car to go into town to find out where the fires were, we just had to sit it out, hoping that nothing would happen, or one of the other shareholders would come to the farm. Our food supply now consisted of a half bag of wholemeal flour, some garlic, half a bag of instant milk, some coffee and one large, nearly empty, tin of Milo. When the Milo was finished, John made an oven out of the tin, wrapping some old chicken wire around it and pressing clay into the wire.

'A clay oven, see?' he said.

He sat it on top of the ashes in the fireplace and baked some pieces of unleavened bread. They tasted like garlic, looked like little poos, and were as hard as rocks. We had to soak them before we could eat them.

The fires they had told us about in town finally arrived after about a week.⁸ It was the middle of the night and we were concentrating on a game of chess. Suddenly we couldn't see the board or the candlelight.

'The smoke!' I said to John. It was so thick I couldn't take a breath. I could hear things falling on the tin roof; they sounded like stones. When we went to the door and looked out, we saw they were little flaming cinders, falling out of the thick smoke like raindrops of fire. The night sky was lit up by a warm red glow.

John was very scared, for the first time since I'd known him; I could feel it.

'The wind's changed and the fire's coming in our direction just like the old man at the shop said,' he gasp.

We stood there together in silence, helpless and afraid, thinking about the family that got boiled alive in the water tank. We had no options. And then, a wonderful miracle happened before us. *Drip, drip, drip* came gentle rain, first slowly and quietly, then heavier and heavier until the smoke was

gone, and water was leaking through every hole on the roof, even filling the old tank at the side. John said a prayer of thanks.

Soon, a month had passed, and salvation arrived in the form of our friend in his little green Beetle. Immediately we drove into town but along the way I was carsick and vomited.

‘I’ll take you to a doctor,’ John said, so I saw one in town, who gave me some surprising news.

‘You’re two months pregnant,’ he said.

I didn’t feel happy that I was going to have a baby. I had never had anything to do with babies and I didn’t know what was involved or what to expect or even how I was supposed to feel.

Our money had run out, so we couldn’t buy more supplies. We also couldn’t go bush without any, so John and our friend made a decision.

‘We’ll go on to Adelaide,’ he told me. I didn’t have a choice, and I was pregnant. It felt like the force of fate had swept me along without me having any control.



It was a long drive to Adelaide where we stayed in a caravan park when we first got there. John was trying to get recognised by a producer in the music scene and made some appointments to have meetings with different people, but nothing came of it. They weren’t ready for his kind of music in Adelaide.

We needed some money, as usual, so I got a job in a shop selling video players. It was so boring all day waiting for customers that never came in and the boss came out to talk to me one day.

‘I’ll give you some money if you do some modelling,’ he offered. I agreed; pay day wasn’t anytime soon, and John and I didn’t have our rent money.

I drove out with the boss to his house where he introduced me to another girl and a man.

‘We’re going to make some pornography,’ he told me.

I had no idea what that was, but I soon found out.

After giving me a glass of wine, my boss told me to take my clothes off, which I did. He came over to me, laid me down on the floor and got on top of me. I went into a silent protest, but my mind and voice were paralysed to prevent him. When he looked into my eyes, he must have seen the hate I had for him and the hate I had for what was happening to me. Immediately he stopped, got up and turned away.

‘Get dressed,’ he said, and I fumbled with my clothes. I felt dirty, as if I had done something very wrong.

My boss drove me back to my caravan, thrust some money at me and left. I sat alone in the van, upset and confused, waiting for John to come home. When he came in, I put the \$100 on the table.

‘I nearly had to have sex with him,’ I told him.

He bent his head and looked like he was going to cry but he held back the tears and just sat quietly for a while. We never talked about it again.

After some time in the caravan park, we moved into an old stone house owned by the parents of our friend from Adelaide, Mel. It was an old, falling-down, stone hut built by the early settlers that was not visible from the road. A huge tree had taken over the whole building and we had to go into the tree to get inside the room. We lived on a billy of fresh milk loaded with cream that I bought every morning from the milk cart that came down the road.

After about four weeks Mel came and picked us up and took us to his parents' home.

'You can stay here for here for a while,' told us.

Mel's mother got up at 6am every morning and made her husband's breakfast and a packed lunch.

'You have to go and look for work,' she told me. Later, in the kitchen she grilled me more.

'Does your mother know where you are? And are you married? You shouldn't be living together, it's wrong; we are married and very happy. If your boyfriend loved you, he would marry you.'

I didn't mind her saying those things, but she was talking about a world that I knew was full of falseness, pretence and lies. Her words had some effect however; that day I caught a train into Adelaide and got a job sorting soiled linen, some of it spattered with blood and guts, in the Adelaide Hospital's laundry.

After a month we moved into a house in the city with some other people, including the guy Norbert from Orbit. I changed jobs and worked as a mender for a drycleaner for a short while, until I stopped working because of my pregnancy. On my eighteenth birthday John gave me some paints and a small canvas. I sat in a room by myself in front of an easel and began painting red female bodies, gracefully swimming up towards a silver sun, silver droplets showering the air. I felt sad and lonely.

As time went by, my tummy was getting bigger and my body was changing. I felt serene and I liked the feeling of a baby in my tummy, but I didn't know how to behave or where I stood with John. He went off constantly with his best friend who was working in the mines, coming back with lots of money and dope. When we lay in bed together at night, I hoped for unity between us but his mind was elsewhere.

When I was six months pregnant John took off to Sydney to play music and didn't come back. I felt he should be with me, so I decided to hitch to Sydney and find him. As I was leaving, Norbert from Orbit stopped me.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Sydney,' I told him.

He shrugged. 'I wouldn't mind going too.' So we set off together.

We hitched a lift with a semi driver along the Hume Highway. I was sitting near the window and Norbert was sitting in the middle next to the driver who was popping pills to stay awake. As we travelled into the night, I became very tired.

'You can sleep on the floor of the cabin,' the driver told me. 'Lie down on my coat if you like.'

I settled down on the floor and dozed off but woke suddenly from being thrown around the floor; it felt like the brakes were on and was being slammed against the cabin walls. We came to an abrupt stop and I lifted myself to see what was going on. Outside the windows it was completely red; it looked like the truck was on fire.

'It's on fire!' screamed Norbert, treading on me in his haste to jump out of the truck.

'Are you all right?' It was the driver's voice. 'Are you, all right?' He came around to me and gently lifted me out of the cabin before looking me over. My dress was ripped and my arm hurt.

'Are you okay?' he asked again.

'Yes,' I said, still in a bit of a daze.

The driver looked back at Norbert in disgust. 'That's some coward of a bloke you got there,' he said. 'He thought the truck was on fire but it's just

the red lights of the truck reflecting on the dust that got stirred up. He was going to leave you for dead.'

The driver had fallen asleep, he told us, apologizing in a shaky voice. After going around the truck and checking everything, he said, 'It's okay, you can get back in now. We're very lucky; this is the only part of the Hume Highway that isn't fenced and we just came off the road into a dirt paddock.'

Fortunately, we didn't have to hitch another ride. The driver dropped us off in Sydney at Paddy's Markets and soon we were back at the house in Paddington. John was there; he looked at me with surprise, but it was as if a burden had just come back into to his life.

Our time in Sydney didn't last very long, as John decided to take me back to Adelaide, driving with Sam in his kombi van. Again, the trip wasn't without incident.

'Stop here?' John suggested on the desert part of the highway. 'We can set up a campsite.' But just as we had put the billy on the ground a billion ants started charging towards us. They came from every direction like an invading army.

'Quick!' screamed Sam. 'Get in the car! Run!' We just managed to scramble back into the kombi and shut the doors as the ants got to the bottom of the wheels.

Not long after we arrived back in the shared house in Adelaide, John headed off again, away to Sydney once more. I didn't know what to think. Was he trying to get rid of me? I was seven months pregnant, and Adelaide was in a heatwave. A hot wind was blowing a gale and the only relief I could find was to lay in a cold bath. It was unpleasant, and I felt sad that I was once again on my own. I had a driving need to be with John. One day I saw keys to a car owned by one of our friends on the kitchen table. I picked them up.

'I'm going to drive to Sydney,' I told another boy who lived in the house. He was a kind, gentle unassuming boy who never said an unpleasant word.

'I have to go with you,' he said.

'Why?' I asked.

'God wants me to look after you.' He had a tone of confident conviction in his voice. I didn't understand his answer, but I didn't question it either.

We set off with me driving, just fitting behind the wheel with my growing tummy. I didn't have a licence, nor did I have much driving experience, but I was determined to get to Sydney and find John. We drove along the Hume Highway and through the desert, travelling all night until dawn, when we ran out of petrol.

We parked on the side of the road and fell asleep. A few hours later an Army bus full of soldiers pulled up beside us.

'Need help?' A young soldier tapped on the window.

'We've run out of petrol,' I explained.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

Luckily, I had an address that I gave him.

'Come on, we'll take you there,' he said. 'It's on our way.'

They gave us water and sandwiches and shared Army banter along the way until they dropped us at the front door of the house we were headed to.

'Thank you,' I said as I waved them goodbye. They drove away smiling kindly.

Before we went in, my friend turned to me. 'You arrived safely,' he said. 'I have to go now; you don't need me anymore.' And he left me standing at the door.

When I went in there was a round, blond, older woman standing in the kitchen.

‘Where’s John?’ I asked her, just as he came walking down the stairs in a towel. The pain in my heart was taken over by exhaustion and the need to rest. I went back upstairs with him into a room that had a bed on the floor.

‘You belong to me and you have to be with me,’ I told him. ‘I’m having your baby.’ He said nothing and simply laid down on the mattress next to me.



Having given up the idea that he could get rid of me John decided to take us back to the bush. This time he made sure he had supplies. We moved back out, joining a community of other families who had moved onto the land by now. They had begun building mud brick or railway slab huts to live in. The men worked together to put a floor in the second half of the shed and a fireplace, creating a community space. On Friday nights all the families came together in the shed bringing with them soups, cakes, mulled wine, musical instruments and their best dope. All the adults were older than me and better educated. One was an architect; others were sons of important men from rich backgrounds. However, they all prided themselves on being dropouts or, as they preferred to term themselves, “settlers”. Many of them were able to play beautiful music on a variety of instruments, and those few nights, before the troubles started, were happy and friendly. We enjoyed being together.

The people on the land had formed a Company to buy the land, so we had to have Company meetings. I couldn’t understand what people were talking about at these meetings. I only understood that they always ended in arguments. I sat in silence watching them battle it out. They were like roosters in a chook pen, all trying to out-do each other and be kingpin. It

certainly wasn't the peaceful communal existence everyone had been hoping for.

I received a letter from Mum fairly soon. She said she was coming down to visit with her boyfriend and bringing my grandmother's treadle sewing machine with her. John was away playing music for a couple of days so I prepared for her visit. I even milked the cow down in the community paddock for her to have a cup of tea and made some butter. I had to meet her at the shed, so I waited until I saw her boyfriend's car coming down the dirt road. They put the sewing machine on the grass and followed me on foot up the hill, around the mountain track, to the top of our little green valley.

I was just about to point out the beginnings of our half-built cabin to her when suddenly she stopped, an expression of shock and horror on her face. Her mouth dropped open.

'What? This?' She looked down onto the skeleton of our cabin in horror and turned immediately around, dragging her boyfriend behind her. She left me standing there, totally broken hearted. I went down to my place, sat quietly, and sucked on a tailor-made cigarette she had given me.

Chapter Nine

I wanted to get married to John. After all, we had a baby coming, and I thought it was the right thing to do. I got a lift to town, two hours' drive away, to find a church. When I found one, I asked to see the Reverend. He took me into his little office where I sat opposite him with my enormous pregnant tummy sticking out.

'I want to get married,' I told him.

'Married! What do you want to get married for?' He almost turned up his nose at my request. 'Sex is such a dirty business.'

But I insisted and a date was set.

I didn't think about the actual birth because life was moving so fast and out of my control, I relied on John to make decisions for everything. However, having only a few weeks until we were married forced John to work on our cabin more urgently. That meant most mornings he would have a couple of joints and go and help one of the others on their houses and then they were supposed to come and help him in turn. The progress on our cabin was slow.

He had already chopped down twelve straight Stringy Bark trees, debarked them and put them in the ground in the shape of a square around a centre pole. But he needed the help from the other men to carry sheets of tin up and over the mountain for the roof, which he would put on later. The plan was to put wire around the sides of the poles; my job would be to sew hessian bags on them with a bag hook. John would then whitewash them using a paintbrush with a mixture of paint and cement. When they dried, we would have weatherproof walls. We didn't quite have time to get much of the building done, however, so we were still sleeping in the tent.

One of the older mums from the farm made me a wedding dress of yellow crepe that flowed gracefully over my big tummy. John let my parents know we were getting married, but they wouldn't come down.

On the day there were five of us: The Reverend, two witnesses, John and me.

When he put the ring on my finger he said, 'There's enough power in this ring to turn the earth three times,'

'He's put a magic spell on it,' I thought.

As we came out of the Gothic church building, people from the farm and John's mother greeted us. After she had kissed us and taken some photos we left. Some friends had gifted us the time away for a honeymoon in their fishing cabin by the seaside. Phil gave us a lift out to it in his Beetle.

On the first day of our honeymoon, I was standing at the bench, when I felt water running down the inside of my leg. I thought I had wet myself.

'Sorry,' I said to our friend who was still with us.

'I'll get John,' he said. 'I think your waters have broken.'

'What are "waters"?' I wondered to myself.

They bundled me into the back of the small VW and drove to the only open doctor in the sleepy fishing town. He turned out to be a veterinarian

but John decided to knock on the door anyway to ask his advice. An unshaven old man opened the door.

‘We are booked in to have this baby at the Natural Birth Clinic in Galston, Sydney.’ John did the talking; the man hardly looked at me. ‘Would it be okay for my wife to travel the 400 miles to have the baby there?’ He was confident that the man would give us the right advice.

‘Yes, oh, yes she’ll be fine, you can do that,’ he said, and shut the door.

I half lay, half sat on the back seat of the old car, trying to stay comfortable. The journey was long, and I was frightened. I didn’t know what was supposed to happen when a baby was born. I hadn’t had time to find out during my pregnancy because I spent most of it scratching out an existence or looking for John!

The boys turned and looked back over the front seat occasionally to see how I was going.

We pulled up at Karl’s place who was now living in Dural, he welcomed us and let us stay in a spare room, assuming we’d be heading to the clinic at some point, but the labour didn’t progress all that night or the next day. When Karl came home that evening he started yelling at John and Phil.

‘Get out! You’re lying; she’s not in labour! You’re just looking for somewhere to stay and you’re using Lesley to get it!’

The three of us quickly exited his house. I was bundled into the back of the car again, very uncomfortable.

All night we sat in the car in the cold and the dark until, at dawn, the boys decided to drive to the clinic. It looked just like an ordinary house but when we walked in the front door the room was dimly lit with candles. The sounds of women quietly groaning and panting blended with the soft music that was playing on a stereo in the corner.

I was quickly ushered onto a table; there were lights shining on it, and instruments ready for surgery. The doctor was angry with us.

‘You had sex after her waters broke,’ he accused. But we hadn’t.

When he started telling me to ‘Push! Push!’ I screamed out loud; that was what I had seen on television and that was what I thought I was supposed to do.

But my baby was born; he was 6lb 4oz, and a boy. He had infected lungs and I had an infected uterus.

That night I slept peacefully with my baby on my breast in a quiet room. Early in the morning, I opened the curtains and found double French doors that opened out onto a lovely garden. Rocking my beautiful baby in my arms, I felt as if I had just been born with him. I felt clean and light. Suddenly Karl appeared in the open doorway. His head was bowed and he paused.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. Forgive me, please?’

I felt so happy and serene that I didn’t have any unforgiveness in my heart. I just smiled and let him look at my baby. He stared at him for some time then said again, ‘I am sorry.’

Midway through the morning a girl asked me to come to the phone.

‘There’s a man on the line,’ she told me.

I didn’t know where John was yet; I hadn’t actually seen him since last night. Perhaps he was calling me now. I went to the phone while the doctor checked the baby and gave him some more medicine.

I did not recognise the voice on the other end of the phone. With slurred, grating speech he said something that sounded like, ‘Your mother wants to see you and the baby. Will ya come up to Woy Woy?’

The voice and request weighed my heart down and filled it with darkness. Drunken men repulsed me. John came in as I hung up the

phone.

‘Mum got some drunk bloke to ring up,’ I told him, disappointment in my voice. ‘She asked me to bring the baby for her to see.’ We both didn’t want to, but John thought it was the proper thing to do.

Before we left the clinic that afternoon the doctor instructed us on how to give the baby his medicine and handed us a prescription for me. I never saw that doctor again.

Faithful Phil drove us up to my parents’ house. Mum was waiting there with some baby clothes. She held the baby, but she was not approving of John. In fact, she was cranky.

‘Dad’s in the hospital with pneumonia,’ she told us. ‘You should visit him there.’

It was a little private hospital tucked away down a street near the beach. When I walked into Dad’s room with my baby, Dad sat straight up. I could tell he was in pain but at least he looked sober. I placed my baby into his arms, and he held him and stared at him in awe; he didn’t speak, just had a look of wonder on his face.

‘He’s beautiful,’ he said, in a voice choked with emotion.’ He kept holding him, just staring at him. Finally, when he handed him back, he asked if I was well and politely acknowledged John.

‘I need to rest now,’ he told us, so we left.

On our way back down to the bush John decided to swing by Canberra and visit his parents. I had never seen such a big house—or such a big kitchen! ‘What’s that?’ I whispered to John, pointing to a thing in the kitchen.

‘It’s a dishwasher,’ he said. ‘Mum needs one because she has to entertain politicians for Dad.’

I walked through the house to the garden outside and sat on the wall of a garden bed. John's father came out and sat on the opposite garden wall.

'How is the baby?' he asked. He crossed his legs and folded his arms across his body.

'Good,' I answered. It felt like he was as scared of me as I was of him.

'Are you feeding him yourself?' It was almost as if he was speaking on behalf of someone else.

'Yes,' I said, holding my baby to my breast.

After the interview was over and John's parents had taken him into another room to give him their best advice we headed off to freedom.

We drove from Canberra back down to the farm with our baby in arms and our supplies replenished. We were still sleeping in our army tent until the cabin was properly finished. Our double bed just fitted into it, with room for a bassinet on one side and a cardboard box for our clothes on the other. There was no room to stand up, so we had to crawl around in it.

Our toilet was a hole in the ground dug each time with a spade. When we ran out of toilet paper, we used the wide soft leaves of a plant which grew abundantly in the area. We named it the "toilet paper plant."

I was successfully breastfeeding on demand as well as helping John with the building of our cabin and cooking on the open fireplace. The grass in our little valley began to turn brown-grey as the nights got colder and the sun lost its warmth in the daytime. The air was cold all the time but colder around our face and ears at night. The temperature was usually below zero, and the tent was open at the front, so we were forced to wear our clothes to bed.

Our little baby cried a lot. John said he was constipated and told me he knew what to do. I didn't want him to, but he did it anyway. He put some sunlight soap on his little finger and put it in our little baby's anus.

‘I know this will work,’ he said.

But our baby cried. He did pass some poo, but I was upset and sad that John did it that way. I wanted him to stop.

Our life together might have turned out successfully if John hadn’t met a man called Trevor, from town. He had a young family but spent a lot of time getting John to play music with him at his place and at the pubs up the coast. He was a short man, always chewing on a match and rolling a smoke. He’d never smoked dope before John gave him some. He took it, but his wife refused.

One morning, Trevor came to our place. He was standing with one hand in his pocket, ignoring me but speaking quietly to John.

‘I heard there was going to be a big jam up the coast. If we get together, I know the owners of the local pub and we could play there and get paid.’

John couldn’t resist. He turned to me. ‘You’ll be okay,’ he said. ‘The Joneses are only down the track. If you need anything you can go there.’ He picked up his guitar and pipe and was quickly gone. The few tins of food we had, and our small supply of firewood were to suffice until he came back. I would just have to keep breast-feeding and try to keep us both warm.

That night I laid my baby in the warmth of our bed, blew out the candle and fell half-asleep waiting and listening for John to come home through the bush. Sometime during the cold night, I woke up with an overwhelming knowing feeling in my heart: my husband had been unfaithful to me.

The next morning, I took a bucket and my baby and walked down about 500 meters to the creek to get some water. I laid him on his blanket on the soft green moss growing between the rocks. He was crying so I pulled out my recorder and started playing notes for him; I thought it

would help. After scooping up a bucket of water, I struggled up the steep hill with the bucket in one hand, and my baby in the other arm. The bracken on each side of the thin man-made track was as tall as my head, and as I ducked round the rough wet leaves, I lost water from the bucket. When I reached the camp site, the bucket was nearly empty and the baby was still crying.

Two days later, John was still not home. I collected my baby's washing in a bucket and with him in the other arm I made my way down the valley and along the path that ran beside the drying creek bed.

Sounds of children and music got louder as I approached the campsite. One of the women, Joan, was working over a large cauldron filled with hot water and soap bubbles.

'Welcome,' she said. 'Yes, you can come and do your washing here.' She had four lines of washing hanging between the trees, but she put up another line of rope for mine. Her life seemed chaotic: she was trying to feed her children and keep them away from the fire, all the while fighting ants who were collecting food to last through the winter. Through most of the day we talked and looked after the lively children but all the while I had the feeling of dread in my heart that told me that John had been unfaithful.

Late that afternoon, when I got back up to our tent, John came down from the other direction. He sat on the end of the bed.

'I slept with Lin last night,' he told me. 'But it was not my fault. We played music until it was too late for me to drive back here so she said I could stay at her place. Then she said she didn't have another bed and I had to sleep in her bed. Then she said that I couldn't wear my dirty jeans in her bed, and I had to take them off. Then she seduced me.'

I reacted dramatically, throwing my wedding ring off my finger. John lost his temper.

‘That’s it then,’ he yelled, and walked away.

The moment I threw the ring away, I wished I hadn’t. I started looking for it in the dirt and leaves of our tent floor but to no avail. I never found it again.

We might have kept arguing but the cold and darkness of the night setting in took priority over; we had to get the fire going to make some food.



Over the next four weeks all the settler families decided to help each other build their houses. Each day an agreed home would take its turn in having the volunteers come around and lend their tools and efforts to make good, lasting buildings. The women made soup and sandwiches for the men as most of the women had small children or were expecting one. By now, our place had ten Stringy Bark upright posts in the ground, ready for a tin roof and walls. Outside, in the sun, I used a freestanding bench made out of railway sleepers for the washing up and food preparation.

It was at this bench while I was washing up that I glanced down the hillside and spotted a woman moving up through the bracken and wattle trees, coming towards my place. I could see, even from a distance, that she was beautiful. She had blond hair, was wearing a sarong and was carrying a bowl of fruit on her head. *She is not dressed for the cold*, was my immediate thought.

The woman appeared to float through the difficult vegetation, swaying her hips slowly and easily like a belly dancer as she walked. Closer and

closer she came. Her blond hair sparkled in the winter sun and her tanned oiled skin accentuated her curvaceous body.

She walked straight past me looking around my camp but not at me.

‘Where’s John?’ she said in a sweet voice. Suddenly I had a picture of myself in my mind, with my dirty old coat and men’s overalls, my matted brown hair and my skinny, tired body. Compared to the beauty and style of this woman, I was unattractive. *Less of a woman*. I was only an eighteen-year-old girl whereas she was a woman in her early thirties.

I had no chance.

My voice sounded pathetic to my own ears. ‘He’s over the hill.’

Her beautiful demure attitude dropped, and her voice lost its music. ‘Oh!’ Tell him Lin was here, will you?’ she said. She placed a piece of fruit on my bench and kept walking—in his direction.

Lin stayed around. But there were other people who wanted to have a say in my life too. After three months we were finally ready to put cladding on our walls when over the hill came John’s music mate, Trevor, and his wife, both about 20 years older than us.

Trevor’s wife was nice. The four of us sat down on the fine native grass together and drank from a flask of tea she had brought. She reached over and took my baby out of my arms, looking him over.

‘How is he?’ she asked.

I managed some kind of answer before I noticed that the three of them seemed to be sitting closer together. They were leaning over me and speaking strangely, almost as if they had rehearsed the words.

‘You can’t live here,’ they said. ‘The welfare has found out you’re here and how you are living and they are coming to take the baby off you.’ I felt frightened, and I was clearly outnumbered.

‘And,’ Trevor and his wife continued, with one accord, ‘you are too skinny. You must not have enough milk. We’ve brought you some baby formula and bottles. You must stop breastfeeding and put the baby onto this formula.’

John sided with his friends on this. ‘I think it will be the best thing to do,’ he agreed. I had no defence, I had no defender, I had no friend, I was overpowered.

There was more. And it meant even bigger changes for me.

‘We have found a nice house for you to rent cheaply in town,’ they said.

The two of them packed my things in about ten minutes. John, my own husband, was helping them against me, not saying a word to me.

I felt powerless, frightened and uncertain of what was happening, but I followed behind them up over the mountain and down to the road where their car was parked. Trevor’s wife was carrying my baby. I sat in the back seat with her and my baby, wondering how my life could be changed and taken out of my control so quickly.

The nearest town had a few scattered farms and houses with one store and a community hall. There were only about five different surnames in the town and cousins married each other.

We pulled up in front of a dark brown, weatherboard house half-standing on a slight rise of a grassed yard. Little, wooden, falling-down buildings were scattered around out the back. Inside, the house was painted dark brown from ceilings to floor. There was no power and the end room’s floor had half fallen in, but we moved in to our new home.

John and I were the gossip of the town. People stared at me when I went to the store to buy food. The lady who owned the store even asked me, one day, to come into her adjoining lounge room. She made me comfortable

with a cup of tea and a friendly face but after not too long the questions started coming.

‘Where is your mother?’ She looked intently at me.

‘Woy Woy. She is not interested in me.’ I told her what I truly believed in my heart.

‘I’m sure she must love you?’

‘No.’

She stopped asking me questions and stared into her cup.

I held my baby tightly just waiting for the moment to pass so that I could run away from her.



When he was nearly four months old John got a job on the roads with the council. We were still in the house in town, and by this time he had bought a car.

One night he left me at home, while he went off with Trevor to play music at Lin’s house. It was going to be a big party with lots of jamming.

‘I’ll leave our car here in case of an emergency,’ he assured me as he walked out the door with Trevor.

I lit a candle as soon as he left and walked through the empty draughty house closing all the doors. I had been here on my own before, but this time I was frightened by a presence I could sense following me through the rooms. It was a thick darkness, heavier than black, pressing behind me, then leaning over me, then in the whole room. I was filled with the premonition of death. I was terrified! I ran out of the house for the car as fast as I could with my baby in my arms. I had to protect my baby—this thing, whatever it was, was going to murder him!

I got lost on the road looking for the town where John was, and drove for hours until I used my instinct to find my way to the coast, eventually pulling up in Lin's driveway. All the lights were on and the sounds of live music and people laughing told me it was the right place. When I got out of the car people came out to see who it was. John was following them.

'What are you doing here?' he growled at me, when he saw who it was. 'Where's the baby?'

Lin got him out of the backseat where he was laying in his bassinet.

'Here he is!' she called out to John.

'Thank God! Is he all right?' he asked her. Then he turned to me, growling again. 'You've wrecked our car now, look! The radiator is boiling.'

My baby disappeared in Lin's arms amongst the crowd and back into the party leaving me standing outside by myself with the car, in the cold. Sheepishly, I eventually went into the noise and sat in a corner to wait for John to give me my baby. He was angry with me because I had spoilt his party. Now he had to cut it short to take us home.

For the next couple of weeks, I felt that John was discontented with me. I felt inadequate in every way. I made the baby formula as I should and even made some scones in the fuel stove, but he was not interested in me. He made our baby sleep away from us, with two shut doors between us, so that we couldn't hear him in the night. He was adamant that we should not go to him if he cried during the night.

'Not at all!' he said.

Then one night as we were getting ready for bed, I was playing with our baby, standing him up on my tummy. He was laughing. His beautiful bright blue eyes were smiling, and his face beamed with delight.

'Look!' I said to John, who was pacing up and down at the end of the bed, smoking his pipe. It looked like he had something on his mind. 'He's

standing up on my tummy!’

‘Mmm.’ John glanced over, blowing a ring of smoke and then went back to his pacing.

After a few minutes he stopped in the middle of a step. He turned to me. ‘Can I have two wives?’ he asked. ‘Do you mind if I have Lin?’

Crash! went all my happiness.

‘No!’ It was an instant reaction.

I could tell he was angry with me because I had said no; from that point, he wouldn’t talk to me or look at me. I made a bottle and wrapped the baby up in his bassinet. John put the bottle in his mouth and shut him in the room with the open fire burning in the fireplace. Then he shut our bedroom door, blew the candle out and we went to sleep.

Sometime in the night I thought I heard my baby crying. I lay stiff next to my husband, too afraid to move or go to my baby.

My heart was dying.

Somehow, I knew my baby had died.

At first light the next morning, I had forgotten about the night before. I quietly opened and closed the two doors to go to my baby. In his room, the fire was cold. The dark room smelt like wet ash.

I reached into the bassinet and saw that my baby was not alive. He still had the bottle partly in his mouth.

Numb, I walked back into our bedroom and announced to John, ‘Our baby is dead.’

‘What?’

‘I think our baby is dead.’

He jumped out of bed and rushed to the bassinet grabbing our baby out. He immediately tried to resuscitate him. I sat, staring, from the corner of the room.

‘Tell him you love him!’ he started yelling at me. ‘Tell him you love him!’ He kept repeating this, all the while, working to bring him back.

I had no reaction. I still just sat and stared at him as he banged on our baby’s back desperately.

Just then one of the farm people came in the door. Instantly, he realised what was happening.

‘Oh no! Oh no!’ He tried to help.

‘Get outside!’ John ordered me.

I could hear John’s wails and cries from in the house, as I was standing outside on the uneven ground, unsteady on my feet.

Our friend came out first and got into his car. After him, John came out. He walked up to me with our baby in his arms.

‘Here,’ he snarled. ‘Here’s y’r son.’ He dumped the dead body of my baby in my arms. ‘You can carry him.’

I sat alone in the back seat holding my baby’s body. He felt so heavy. Where there once had been life now was only a weight of death. Where there had been hope was now only hopelessness.

I held him for the duration of the one-hour journey into the next town. John didn’t speak to me; no one did.

When we pulled up John took the body into a building. I didn’t know which building it was, or where we were. I just sat still and numb in the car.

When John came out, he sat in the car with me.

‘I’m going to be charged with murder,’ he said. ‘The black marks on his body, where I tried to resuscitate him... they think I killed him.’

That night and the next day I only wanted to die with my baby. I didn’t want to get up; I didn’t want to live. But John said, ‘I’m not going to be negative and depressed, come on, get up.’

A couple of days later, two detectives dressed in grey suits turned up at the house. They stood in front of the cold fireplace staring at me, staring at the empty bassinet. I could feel their pity passing through my soul.

‘Can you explain where the baby was and where you were and how you found him?’ they asked.

I pointed to the bassinet and stared at it for a long time in silence. After some time, they quietly withdrew, leaving me standing alone in the empty room.

A minister picked us up for the funeral and drove us two hours to the cemetery, but he didn’t speak to us. When we arrived, John held my hand painfully, almost dragging me across the cemetery to where the detectives and others were standing. They were all looking down at a little hole in the ground. In it was a small white cardboard box.

I didn’t look at anyone. I just stood motionless, my head bowed, unbelieving. My dead child could not be in that box.

Again, I could feel the penetrating pity for me from every person standing around the grave. I never looked up. What was there to look up for? My heart was being buried in the earth, along with my baby.

Chapter Ten

About a week after the funeral mum arrived unannounced at our house with one of her male friends.

‘You’ve got to come home with us, Lesley,’ she demanded.

‘But John’s still at work,’ I protested.

‘It doesn’t matter. We’re going now,’ she said.

As we left the house, through the back door I saw some unwashed baby clothes in a cold bucket of water next to the water tank. The smell from them was bad from the fowl water and only compounded the pain that he was dead. It was 365 miles back to her place, and I didn’t speak for the whole trip.



The first place we visited was the pub, of course. All the regulars were there in the beer garden, including Mum’s circle of friends. I could not relate to or join in their conversation. To me, it sounded like meaningless

words sprinkled with sounds of empty cackling laughter. I could add nothing to it.

Because I sat silently, not contributing any comments, Mum thought I had a mental condition. That night she yelled at me and stamped her feet.

‘You need professional assessment. You should go to a mental home,’ she yelled. I stood there in the kitchen staring at her carrying on hysterically, thinking, “You’re the one who needs to be committed.” Instead, however, I submitted to her will. I would commit myself into a mental home and get some “help”.

We went up to Morisset Mental Home together. After the paperwork for my committal was done, Mum left me there.

The Mental Home was a big place, with separate, brick dorms for women and men, all painted yellow inside. When I first arrived a psychologist in his consulting room interviewed me alone. He sat at his desk studying me, sitting in the chair, on the other side.

‘Have you tried LSD?’ These were his first words to me.

‘Yes,’ I said.

He leant over the table with a giggle. ‘So have I.’

I thought he was quite mad and not to be trusted. I was honest with him though by telling him lots of things I believed; things like, the flowers sang and the stars had music. I also told him that I could see God in everything.

I stayed in the home for three weeks. During that time, I made a friend, a girl just 18, who was expecting her first baby. We understood each other and got along really well. I worked very hard to convince her to give me her baby when it was born. She agreed it would be better than adopting it out under parental pressure, but to my great disappointment she ran away one night and took the hopes of me having her baby.

The other patients included a couple of older mothers. One of them had six children who was suffering from depression and had taken overdoses.

Morning tea involved everyone having tea, coffee, biscuits and medication. I seemed to be the only one who was not on any meds.

One morning I was doing Yoga beside my bed when a staff member saw me. 'Would you run some morning classes?' she asked me. 'Just show the other ladies the postures you know.' So, we did yoga at 10am while I was there. I felt very sad for the hopeless plight of the other women. Doing yoga seemed to give them something to look forward to.

Mum had also committed Dad to the Mental Home, for his alcoholism and drug problems, and she visited us alternately. On one of her visits the three of us went to the cafe. While we were having our tea, Dad begged Mum over and over to get him out.

'Please,' he told her. 'The doctors experimented on one of the male alcoholics in my ward by giving him LSD. The man had freaked out and ran straight through a plate glass door. You've got to get me out of here.'

I said, 'No mum, don't do it. No, don't!'

She did.

My only other visitor was John who turned up when he found out where I was.

'How embarrassing for me that you let your mother put you in here,' he told me in a quiet voice. 'I can't make it in the music scene now!' Then he left me there.

After three weeks in the Mental Home, I was released and moved into a newly painted little caravan in Mum's back yard that she had bought for \$200. She was so excited, fluffing about putting everything in it she thought I needed. I had tea-making things, a small bed with a warm doona and pretty curtains all around for privacy. The caravan was positioned in front of Mum's hopper kitchen windows. When she opened them first thing in the morning, she would stick her hand out to me, waving, with a big smile.

I felt very lonely and I wanted to live the right kind of life, but I didn't know what that was. Mum suggested that I go down to the church and join the youth group. I found out that they were having a barbecue at the leader's place and arranged to meet them there.

As I came into the gate, they were already cooking their meat and well into conversations. Cautious introductions were made and then the leader invited me to put my meat on.

'Do you have a can opener?' I asked.

'What do you need a can opener for?' he said.

I lifted up my tin of vegetarian sausages I had bought especially for the occasion. 'For these.'

'Ha ha, look at this!' he said, showing the can to everyone, 'Vegetarian sausages. Ha ha.' Together they all laughed with him.

I felt shooting pains stabbing my heart and a sudden urge to run but I kept my composure, took the can opener and laid four sausages on the barbie. Later, when they weren't looking, I snuck away unnoticed.

Tucked into my warm bed in the van that night, I was bursting in my soul with pain. I could hear the intelligible voices of mum and dad yelling at each other in the house. Gentle rain began to fall on the thin roof. It brought comfort to my empty heart and a peaceful sound for me to focus on as I fell asleep.

The rain had gone by the early morning. The birds were chattering in the trees and Mum was whistling cheerful tunes from somewhere inside the house.

From my bed, I brushed back the curtains and looked through the window to Mum who was waving to me out of her window, the dishcloth in her hand.

‘Good morning,’ she called to me.

I put my hand on the window lock, turned it, and then pushed the window open... only, the window fell off out onto the ground. I sat up and looked around the van. Everything inside was wet, even the curtains.

The caravan leaked. Mum had been ripped off.

And once again, I had nowhere to stay.

Mum suggested I go on the bus up to my brother in Byron Bay. She paid for my ticket and when I got there, my brother got me a room in a share house with another girl who had the same name as me. The only things I had were the clothes I had on and a few other changes in my army duffel bag. I was wearing a straight woollen skirt down to my knees and a tucked-in blouse around town because I wanted to be respectable. After I met my house mate, and had a look around the house, I went down the street, looking for a Health Food Shop to buy some dried fruit and nuts. As I walked up the shop’s steps, I came up behind the girl who I was renting with.

‘You should see this girl who’s moved in with me,’ I overheard her telling the shop assistant. ‘She is so old fashioned and straight.’

I didn’t buy anything. I just walked straight back out and found some butter in the supermarket. I lived for a week on butter and steamed chokos from the vine next to the house. My brother never came to see me; I didn’t even know where he lived.

My soul was in spiritual torment. My heart was gripped by grief and guilt about my baby. I felt driven to God, but I couldn't find him. When Saturday night came around, I sat and watched my housemate getting dressed up to go down the pub with the rest of Byron. I remained in the darkened house for a while and then I decided just to walk around the streets.

When I came to a church with big wooden doors a burst of desperation overwhelmed me, and I shoved and shoved my body against the front doors until they broke open. Even though it was dark inside I could still see light coming through the stained-glass windows as I walked slowly up to the altar. There were things around it and on it; I couldn't make out what they were, but I could see a white cloth spread over it and a big cross in the middle.

I longed to leave the world and be with God. I longed to be clean. I fell to my knees begging God, in complete sincerity, 'Please, make me a Nun?'

After a few minutes I crept back out, satisfied that God was going to *do something*.

The next morning as I was sitting on the steps watching all the people coming out of the church, I noticed the way they were dressed. The ladies all wore ironed, knee-length dresses with stockings, tidy handbags and gloves. Suddenly one of them came over to me and stooped down.

'Would you like to come to lunch with us?' she invited me. I had no reason not to go, so I went with them in their new car.

Their new two-storey brick house overlooked the ocean and the steep driveway was just big enough for the boat and the car. The lady had a quiet daughter called Ruth, who was my age. I was given a bed in her room and one of her dresses to put on after I had showered. A lunch of sandwiches

and lemonade was served on the veranda upstairs. I sat on a spare chair as they sat in their usual chairs, relaxing and sharing food.

After lunch we continued to sit on into the afternoon. The silence was occasionally broken by the lady gracefully waving her hand in the air pointing out the beauty of the day whilst proclaiming, 'Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord.'

Even though the sky was bright blue and the sea a beautiful aqua, and even though there was a gentle sweet breeze circulating along the beach; over where we were sitting, the joy the day could have given me was clouded by my grief.

I couldn't understand what she meant by, 'Praise the Lord.' The life they were living was far away from my reality. I had too much going on in my spirit—it felt like a never-ending tornado. Food and being "nice" just didn't scratch the surface of my pain. After a restless night's sleep, I needed to get away from them.

I had them take me to the station so I could leave. As I stood on the platform, wearing their daughter's clothes and holding a ticket paid for with their money, the woman said, 'Do you have to go?'

'Yes' I said, making up a lie. 'I'll be okay at my mother's place.'

As I boarded the train, I looked back at her to smile and wave; all I saw was concern and disappointment as she waved back to me.



I got off the train at the next station feeling like a deceiver but relieved to be free. I made a beeline for my brother's house. He took me to a new place where I could stay as long as I wanted. It was an old, disused slaughter yard, and my bed was a cement bulwark.

‘You’ll be okay here,’ he said, handing me an old sleeping bag. I used my clothes for a pillow and settled down for the night. I had a small gold cross in my pocket which I took out and placed on my forehead, praying that it would put power into my mind and make me closer to God. I could see the stars through the abattoir’s broken roof, but I could also feel and smell death the fear of the tortured animals that had been slaughtered here. Dust mingled with dried blood blew around in the dark. Nothing good had happened here.

The next morning, I walked into Byron to the local community centre.

‘Do you know of anything I could do?’ I asked them. ‘I don’t have a job, but I want to do *something*.’

They sent me to a nursing home, where the Matron in charge asked me if I would be willing to look after the old people, helping to feed them and groom them in exchange for a bed. I said yes.

I really enjoyed caring for the old ladies and men, filling their pipes, brushing their hair, taking them for walks and helping them to eat. They made me forget about myself and my troubles. One 90-year-old lady beat me up the hill, she was so fit. She puffed me out because I was so rundown.

It went well for about three weeks, until I woke up one morning with terrible pain on the side of my heart. Every time I moved the pain was excruciating. The Matron called the doctor who said I had an inflamed cracked rib cartilage and I need to lie still with hot poultices on me. That day investors in grey suits who owned the Home turned up for an inspection. When they found out that the Matron had given me a bed in exchange for work, I overheard them speaking gruffly to her in the next room about me.

‘She can’t stay here. It’s not a halfway house or a charity and she’s not covered by insurance.’

‘I’m so sorry, Lesley,’ said a sad-looking Matron. ‘You’ll have to leave.’



I needed a safe place to stay, so I decided to hitch back down to the bush, where at least I couldn’t be kicked out. I had a good run until I got a lift with a man in a white van.

‘Where do you want to go?’ he asked.

‘Oh, I just want to find a creek,’ I answered.

‘What for?’

‘To wash.’ (I hadn’t had a chance because I had been in bed for two days)

He turned off the High-Way about ten minutes out of town and drove down a track where he stopped beside a clear, running creek.

‘Thank you,’ I said, as I got out, expecting him to drive away then I noticed he sat still in his van watching as I made my way through some bushes to the water.

A very strong feeling of danger came over me. I turned and started to run, backtracking as fast as I could through the bushes to the open road and High way. He immediately started reversing his car back up the track, trying to catch up with me, but I beat him to the Highway and the safety of the many cars travelling up and down. I watched him emerge from the bush track and then drive down the road in the direction of town away from me. I never saw him again.

The next lift took me all the way to the Central Coast where I was dropped in the centre of Gosford, and had to walk to get back on the Pacific Highway. Just as I crossed the railway bridge a police car pulled up in front of me.

A young policeman wound down the window. 'What's your name and how old are you?'

'Lesley, and I'm nineteen.' I said, feeling ambushed.

'Don't lie, you're that twelve-year-old runaway we're looking for,' he growled at me. 'Get in.' I was driven to the Gosford Police Station and taken to a room where a number of uniformed officers were typing or walking about busy with their work. Three of them came over to me, one of them a female.

'Do you have an address?'

'No.' My house on the farm with John didn't have one.

'Do you have a job or any money?'

Again, all I could answer was, 'No.'

'Well?' said the oldest man, 'What shall we do with her?'

They seemed to be enjoying frightening me by dragging out what they were going to do with me. Finally, the female officer who was sitting on the table grunted. 'Ahh, let's just charge her with vagrancy.'

I was taken to a holding centre for girls somewhere in Sydney, waiting to be sentenced the next day. The place was full of wild girls who talked of nothing but hate for everyone and anything. I seemed to be the oldest girl there, and was put on toilet duty, which I did in silence.

At breakfast time about 100 girls sat down to porridge. I was starving and finished quickly, then sat in silence with my head down, waiting for the next order. The very large female officer overseeing us pointed only to me and said in the kindest voice, 'Go on, fill your bowl up again.'

At midday I was taken into a courtroom to stand before the judge. To my surprise my sister-in-law (John's sister) came in and stood next to me.

'I'll take her into my care,' she offered. The judge agreed, and made a court order releasing me to her.

I could feel that my she really cared for me. She took me to an Ashram where she lived with other very devout people and showed me around the house and kitchen garden.

‘This is your bed,’ she explained. ‘Also, you need to have this cross.’ She handed me something that looked like a chalkboard ruler. ‘When we go to Meditation, you must sit on the floor with your legs crossed and place this white sheet over your head, covering your whole body. You then place your arms over the wooden cross and lean on it.’

She explained that I would be the ‘Home Mother’ of the Ashram. I would clean the house, make lunches and cook dinner while the rest of the residents were all out at work. ‘You won’t earn any money, but you will earn your keep by doing this,’ she told me. ‘All the money we earn we give to the Ashram and the Divine Light.’

I did the work to the best of my ability, according to her explanation, over the next couple of days. At least I found I could make sandwiches and cook up some lentils and rice. We had Meditation every night. When after about an hour, we had come out of our individual sheets, I could see the purity in the people all around them like a light. I couldn’t see a light at the bottom of my heart, though.

One morning, after everyone had left the house, I stood at the kitchen sink staring out the window. I felt alone and overwhelmed with sadness. I started thinking about the very large photo of The Boy Maharishi standing in a golden frame in the main room. Desperate for help, I tiptoed in and slowly knelt down in front of him. I bowed my head sincerely begging, offering my plea. ‘Please give me a pure heart?’ Surely, he would do that, I thought admiring all the pretty colours and flowers all around him.

That same night I was to meet my sister-in-law at the main Divine Light Temple in the centre of Sydney just up from Central Station. It was already dark as I was walking through the park, but I could see the lights of the Temple in the far distance. I paused, steeped in my sadness and sat down on a park seat and began weeping, sobbing. My whole body was trembling from the pain in my soul.

After some time, I heard an old man's voice ask me, 'Why are you crying little girl?' I looked beside me. There were some newspapers partly covering an old coat, which was hiding an old drunk from the cold. His empty bottles caught bits of the streetlights in the distance.

'I'm meant to go into the Temple but I'm not worthy,' I confessed, choking on my words. 'They are all purer than me. I'm not good enough to go in.'

It wasn't the words he said next that affected me; it was the love and understanding in his voice that comforted me. 'You is more pure than all of 'em,' he said. 'So, don't cry, go in and be brave.'

I felt strangely loved; he had judged me from his high throne of brokenness and humiliation.



I stayed at the Ashram for a while, but once again my troubled soul compelled me to go south. It was only a few months since my baby had died but I hadn't really realised it. Driven by an inner need to find him I took to the Princes Highway again hitching for rides that would take me the 360 miles south.

I was on quite a good run and had made it all the way down the coast to just before Eden when a frightening feeling came over me. *Dad is going to*

kill Mum! I made a quick decision. I had to save them, so I crossed to the other side of the road and hitched back. I was tired and hungry, and it was dark plus not many cars were on the road. While I waited, my heart was in a state of panic with worry for them.

Finally, a car came, the door opened, and I slid into the back seat. I didn't take much notice of the two men in the front until they left the road and drove down a bush track.

One of them turned around and offered me a bottle. 'Ere ya' are luv, wanna drink?'

'No,' I said, bracing myself.

'Well ya gonna give us somethin', so 'ow about it?'

'No!'

They immediately stopped the car and started dragging me out the door. I kicked and punched as one of them held me down on the ground while the other one lunged his weight on top of me. My heart was pounding, and I used all my limbs with all my strength to defend myself and stop them from raping me. I bit into one man's shoulder, my teeth sinking into his flesh until blood filled my mouth. Finally, when my strength ran out, and I had nothing left to fight them with, I used the weapon of my mind.

'I'm damaged, I'm damaged,' I cried. 'There's something wrong with me. If you do this to me, you'll damage me forever!'

They stopped immediately.

The older man bent down. 'Look I'm sorry,' he explained. 'I just wanted me mate to get some experience because he's a virgin.'

They didn't waste any time scrambling back into their car and driving off, leaving me in the dark in the bush in the middle of nowhere. I remained curled up on the ground for a long time, not making a sound, in

case they came back for me. I was like a frightened animal, listening for danger until I realised, I was alone.

Finally, when I felt it was safe, I looked around to see where I was, while trying to wash the taste of human flesh out of my mouth with my spit. There was no moonlight, but the canopy of stars was enough to light up the fine white sand under the prickly native shrubs. I laid back down with just my ragged clothes for protection from the cold and waited for the dawn. Just before the dawn's first light I heard the faint sound of cars travelling up and down a road, so I followed it.

I managed to hitch straight back to my parent's at Woy Woy, still with a panic in my heart that I might not make in time to stop the murder. Dad was standing in the kitchen when I walked in. He whirled around to see who walked in the door. 'What are you doing here?'

'I thought you were going to kill Mum.'

'Get out!' he yelled, waving his hand. 'Get out!'

I took off back down the same road I had come to save them on, first running, then walking. My heart was suddenly missing; all love was taken from me.



After many rides I made it back down to the bush. It was 300 miles to Eden then 40 miles to the nearest town and then 12 miles to the farm. It only took me half a day to walk from the town. Summer had come all the blossoms of the black and silver wattles possessed the hum of bees. Little birds flitted here and there playing games in the trees. Flat Rock, which overlooked the valley, had a waterfall flowing down its sheer front keeping the creek flowing. I arrived at midday, just as the other 'settlers' were working in the

community garden, which was in a paddock parallel to the road I was walking on. Tears flowed down my face as the fountain of pain in my heart overwhelmed me.

One of the blokes looked up from his digging when he saw me and stuck his head over the fence. 'Why do you cry all the time, Lesley?' he asked. 'You need to get over it come and get stuck into some work. That'll fix you up.'

I kept walking along the road and up to the shed at the end of the paddock. Nearly every family was working, digging, planting or watering, overseen by the man who spoke to me. He was the one who was the son of one of the directors of BHP and his wife was the architect. They were the ones who had found this land, and they prided themselves on 'dropping out'. I didn't feel like I was one of the group - my world was full of sadness.

When I tried to get to work I was too weak from hunger and couldn't lift a spade.

The shed was a good place to rest until night time so I lay down on an old mattress that was there on the floor. Fear held me back from going over the mountain to my place in case John was there and he didn't want me. To my surprise later in the night he came in with a lamp and went along the line of books on the shelves that had been donated by the members for anyone to read. When he noticed me, he pulled my covers back and had sex with me. When he finished, he left.

I waited for a long time thinking about what I should do. *Did that mean that he wanted me back?* Then I finally decided to go to our place. The moon was just going down and the night was turning black as I started up the hill, walking around the mountainside and along the track. When I was nearly at our place the night became pitch black and I couldn't see where I was going. Suddenly I fell through prickly bracken down into a hole. The top of

the hole was well over my head and I couldn't grab onto anything to pull myself up. I panicked. There might be a nest of snakes at the bottom—or funnel webs.

‘Help!’ I screamed. ‘Come and help me, John.’

Then I saw the light of the lantern and John's hand reaching down. He pulled me up. ‘What are you doing?’ he scolded. ‘Stupid thing for you to do.’ We slept in the bed together, but he didn't want anything to do with me.

The next morning John was gone. I found some flour and made flatbread for breakfast, cooking it on the fire, and eating it with the jam I found in an old kerosene tin. When I looked around me, I saw that while I had been away, he had finished the walls and fireplace and had built a water tank with a tap. He had even built a chook pen, with five bantam hens enclosed in it!

He didn't come back for a few days, and I spent my time looking after the chickens. I loved them! When one of them got very sick I brought her inside and wrapped her up in a jumper and placed her in front of the fire. She was better the next morning.

A lovely warm breeze circulated around the trees of the little valley over those few days, as I experimented with trying to prepare food with potatoes, flour and cheese. I constantly looked out to the chooks, which I had let out to roam, but one afternoon, over the period of a couple of hours I noticed there were less and less of them. Then I couldn't find any.

I was standing next to the pen in dismay, when I heard a burp in the tree above. I looked up to see a big, very fat chicken hawk, sitting on a branch. He was bloated. I was so angry that I went straight inside and got the 12-gauge shot gun, loaded it up, went out and stood in front of the bird to blast it out of the tree. How dare it eat my chooks! I hated that bird. Carefully I took my aim, hoping he didn't fly away and escape my wrath. I

pulled the trigger back.... *Click!* Nothing happened. I quickly went back in, reloaded and came out to the same place again. The bird couldn't lift a wing; he had gorged himself on my hens. I pulled the trigger again. *BANG! Plop!* My revenge was satisfied but I was very sad about losing the hens.

I would have told John about what had happened, but he was still not back. I missed him. I wanted to be good to him and for him but I felt totally inadequate. One morning, while I was sitting next to the pen on the soft green grass, from the depth and desperation of my heart I prayed, 'Please, Father, give me love for my husband?'

It had been a very dry summer. All the grasses had turned brown and the creeks had dried up. Most of the families left the farm to look for work except the Joneses with the four children who lived beside the dried creek, David who lived further around the hill, and Sam who lived yet farther away. John didn't come back at all.

Then one night the rains started falling. They fell for weeks. Everyone had nits in their hair and so did I. I washed my head with kerosene and combed it in front of the fireplace. The nits dropped out by the hundreds onto the wooden floorboards. As I moved around the space in front of the fire, they all followed, moving where I moved. I felt sorry for them and considered creating a nit circus, but after playing with them for a while I had to stomp on them. Eventually after a week I had no nits but all the children on the farm were now bald after their parents shaved all their heads.

Three weeks into the continuous rainfall everything was going mouldy and all the ground was getting muddier and muddier. The brother of one

of the women shareholders, a young 17-year-old boy called James came around looking for jobs. I told him, 'If you dig a trench across the valley in front of my cabin, I'll make you a cheese pie.' He agreed. When he finished, he came up to the kitchen bench and said, 'can I have sex with you?'

I was surprised and horrified at the same time; I hadn't thought of doing such a thing.

'How dare you ask a married woman for sex!' I said, sincerely offended.

'You're enough to drive a man insane,' he said, and left angrily.

After some time, all the waterways were swollen, and no one could get in or out of the farm. I had run out of dry wood and there was only a bit of cheese left in the meat safe when one of the little five-year-old boys from the creek house was sent around by his parents

'Have you got any food?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

He looked around my room until his hungry eye landed on the bit of cheese in the meat safe. He twisted up his face at me, crouching like a starved animal ready to attack. 'Why should you have food and we don't? You should give us that cheese.'

I was shocked that such a nice little boy who I had played with, chasing dragons through the bush, could turn into an enemy from hunger. Before I could answer him or give it to him, he disappeared away back down the valley.

Eventually the thin, dry creek-bed that ran down the side of our cabin swelled with water until the whole valley became saturated. It was impossible to step outside without sinking into the ground. Water was now running through our cabin, over the floor and under the bed.

The only thing I could do was to sit on the bed. I had lost weight and I hadn't eaten for days. My body broke out in sores. I just sat and listened to

the rain. The kitchen had mould growing all over it and the bedclothes were damp. I hadn't washed or cleaned my teeth for weeks. I didn't care about myself. Life? Death? Who cared?

Sam started coming by my place each morning, lighting a fire and cooking a bowl of oats for me. He chopped a supply of wood and left it by the fire to dry out. Then David came in with a bunch of Doc Weed and used it to bind up my sores with the leaves. He told me that his mother had escaped Auschwitz. Each morning these two kind men came and looked after me until it stopped raining. My sores were healed but I was empty inside.



When the weather cleared up John came home. I tried to hang onto him, but he gave me the impression that he didn't want me. He mostly wanted to go with his friends and play music rather than putting up with me tagging along behind him.

Every morning started out freezing until he lit a fire. Trying to be useful I washed all his woollen socks and accidentally burnt them by placing them too close to the fire. We began to argue a lot. In one of the arguments he picked up the gun and threatened to shoot himself then changed his mind and picked up the axe instead, chopping it through the bottom of the wheelbarrow.

I was very, very, skinny—so much so that my bones poked out everywhere, and I was always nearly fainting when I stood up. I didn't speak when we smoked dope or move from where I was sitting or lying down because I was afraid. I was afraid of John, afraid of people, afraid of not being able to behave as capably as everyone else around me.

A few weeks later we were on our way back from one of his music/dope sessions when our ute broke down. It was miles from anywhere, so we had to walk and hitch a lift to the nearest town. It was a very hot day and the dirt road was dusty with no trees along the side for shade. John was walking fast and was as cranky as a bear with a sore tooth. I was walking behind him, trying to keep up but the distance was getting greater.

‘John, I can’t walk any more,’ I cried out. ‘Can we sit down?’

He walked quickly back to me and grabbed me by my hair, pulling me over and then along the road. ‘Get up and walk!’ he said, the hardness of his voice and the vicious strength with which he pulled my hair terrified me. I felt so weak, and now I knew he really hated me.

John organised with someone to tow the ute back to our place, but we could only get it to the shed on the road. After that, Trevor told us to bring the ute to his place and he could fix it.

The petrol tank had a hole in it, so as a makeshift fix, John sat a full petrol drum on my lap and ran a hose down to it, to gravity feed the petrol. We drove the 45 minutes into town and then turned up the dirt road to Trevor’s house, but when he saw us, he came running out waving his arms madly.

‘Go over the bracken, go over the bracken,’ he yelled, like a wild thing. ‘The car’s on fire: it’ll put it out!’

As John drove over the wet bracken, I was tossed up and down, petrol splashing over my legs. He stopped the car and jumped out, leaving me sitting there with the petrol drum still sitting on my lap. Together the two males looked under the car to make sure the fire was quenched, and only when they were sure it had gone out, John took the drum off me. I said nothing, but quietly, I wondered if John had meant to murder me.

Chapter Eleven

In the middle of summer my snapdragons were just about to flower when David, who had taken care of me during the rains, came to see me.

‘Come on Lesley,’ he said. ‘Get a lift with me to Sydney. There’s nothing here for you and you will only get sicker. I have a friend up there you can stay with.’ It was obvious to David and the whole farm what was going on between John and I and how it badly was affecting me.

Because David had been good to me and so concerned for me, I followed his advice. I asked John if I could go to Sydney for a while. He agreed, so I filled my army duffle bag with a few things and said goodbye to him. He looked unusually sad to see me go, handed me \$20 and then suddenly dropped to his knees before me. He bowed his head, spread his arms out wide and then, with his eyes closed, said, ‘Take all my blessing with you.’

I turned away from him and started walking up the track. When I glanced back, he was still on his knees with his head down.

David's friend lived in Glebe, in Sydney, and when we arrived at the house, he told me to wait for a moment. 'I'll go in and ask if it's okay,' he said.

Soon, he came out and took me up the stairs into a room where an older man was sitting on a bed.

'This is Lesley,' said my friend, presenting me to him for inspection. Apparently, the man didn't want to take in a stranger who might be a danger to his wife and two children, but after looking me up and down without saying anything he told my friend, 'She can sleep in the garage underneath the house.' He gave me a glance, and said, dryly, 'Welcome.'

I was given a candle and a mattress on the cement floor that I was grateful for. Upstairs lived two families and their brother Dominic. They kindly invited me to all their meals and I quickly made friends with Dominic.

Needing some money, I walked to the CES in the city to look for work. First, they sent me out to a 'sweat shop' sewing factory. I was so angry when I looked around at the state of the women and the conditions, they were working in that I went straight back to the CES to complain.

I walked in the door and straight up to the girl at the desk, 'How dare you send me out to a sweatshop!' I exploded at her.

'We didn't know. We can't check out every place we send you,' she said, looking afraid of me. But there was no other work, so I was put on the dole.

When my first dole cheque arrived, I gave some money to my landlord for my board and took the rest to buy envelopes and stamps. I walked to the University and found the printing department where I printed 100 petitions in gold lettering:

Dear Council

Please can you donate land that can be used for a community garden in Glebe. Thank you.

I put the stamps on the envelopes and letterboxed them with the petitions around Glebe, hoping that people would sign the petition and post them to the Council. Next, I bought some sunflower seeds and butcher's paper, on which I painted pictures of grey city buildings with green plants dotted here and there, trying to depict that without the green stuff there was no life in the city.

Armed with these I dressed myself as a happy clown and went to the steps of the Sydney Town Hall. I placed the paintings upright so that people crossing towards the Hall could see them, while I handed out seeds to anyone who would willingly take one. 'Go home and plant a sunflower seed' I said, handing them out.

I waited patiently for two weeks expecting my sunflower seeds to germinate and grow and make me feel happy. When they didn't, I felt sad and deflated. Probably none of the ones I gave out had grown either, I thought.

I lost my next dole cheque when it blew away out of my hand in a strong wind.



Dominic took a shine to me and wanted to be my lover. I told him time and time again that I was bad, and I would not do him any good, but he was

always kind to me and never said anything to hurt me. His big brother came down to the garage one night when we were lying on my bed.

‘You shouldn’t be doing this little brother,’ he told him. ‘You’ll get hurt. This is bad for you.’ But his little brother ignored him.

One night, Dominic invited me to walk around to a friend’s place with him at about midnight. As we were walking past a small park, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a car slowly pulling up beside us. Three men jumped out and ran up the steep road towards us.

‘Run!’ Dominic called out to me and took off across the park to the other road where two of the men tackled him to the gutter. I ran in the other direction, but by the time I reached the middle of the park one of the men tackled me to the ground. I rolled over on my back screaming just as he had a closed fist ready to punch me in the face but his punch stopped mid-air.

‘Oh! It’s a girl!’ he said, immediately leaving me and running over to join the other two who were beating and kicking Dominic in the gutter.

I got to my feet just as they were running back to their waiting car. I was looking down the hill, but I was aware of lights going on and people coming out of their houses behind me because of my screaming so I yelled out their number plate, as loud as I could, in case someone might write it down.

Suddenly the car screeched to a smokey halt and the driver jumped out. He ran up the road towards me, with his fist clenched. ‘You’re going to forget that! Aren’t you?’ His punch was not far from my face when he suddenly fell backwards. He was struggling to get up and looking above me, but his face was white with fear. Crawling and scrambling as quick as he could, he made it back to his car, jumped in the driver’s seat and sped off.

I wondered for a long time what he saw that frightened him. I felt that I had not been standing there alone in the middle of the park; I felt protected by something.

My friend spent some days in hospital and the men were never caught.

The house was empty when the adults went to work and the children to school. I was still so lonely and sad. The people in the house couldn't work out what was wrong with me when one night a letter came for me from Mum.

'Your sister has died,' she wrote to me, but when I read it, I had no reaction. I left it on the kitchen bench, where one of the women picked up and read it too.

She looked at me with a shocked expression. 'Your sister died? That's terrible, I'm so sorry.' She was waiting for some kind of emotional expression from me, but I had no feeling and didn't express anything. I walked past her, leaving her standing there with her mouth open, speechless. I was treated like a heartless tramp after that.

The next Saturday they all commented on what a beautiful day it was for the beach, so they all packed up the children and left the house early.

Mid-afternoon I heard them all come home earlier than expected and sensed there was something wrong. Instead of happy voices and joyful squeaks from the children there was silence broken by low voiced whisperings. I went up and found out why.

The news was grim. When they were all playing on the beach the youngest of the children had drowned right under their feet.

That night a delegation came down to my garage.

‘We need you to leave, Lesley,’ they told me. ‘You need to go.’ As if it was I who had brought this tragedy to their family.

I could see in their eyes that now they understood of my pain it had from the loss of my child.

Now that I didn’t have anywhere to stay, I thought I would use what money I had and take a train trip out of the city. On my way to Central Station I found a little black poodle that looked homeless, too. With him in my arms I bought a ticket on a train that went to the end of the line, down the South Coast to Bomaderry.

The little poodle gave me some comfort in that I had someone to be lonely with. When I got off the train in the little town, straight away I enjoyed the fresh air, quietness and the abundance of flowering trees. The only pub in the street was painted all white. It was two-story with a balcony all around the second one. I walked in and paid for a room with two single beds, one for me and one for my poodle friend.

Our room had double French doors that opened out onto the balcony and overlooked the trees growing along the quiet streets. I longed for a safe restful sleep. I hadn’t eaten and I didn’t want to go downstairs to get any food because I could hear men’s voices talking together like a conglomerate of drum rolls. They frightened me.

My poodle friend had just gone to sleep, curled up on the other bed and I was dozing off when the door suddenly opened. I sat up stunned. There was a man standing in front of me with something in his arms.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘Thought you might be hungry, so I brought you up some prawns.’ He put the parcel on my bed and started to open it. He was drunk.

My anger was stronger than my hunger.

‘Get! Out!’ I yelled at him as I shoved the prawns back at him and pushed him out the door. With every step he took backwards he kept trying

to offer me his company with the food.

‘No! Go away! I don’t want anything,’ I screamed and shut him out. The door had a very flimsy lock, so I slept half-awake until dawn. Somewhere between the pub and the station my poodle companion left me. I took the train back to Sydney.

Around this time, John was living in another house in Glebe with a bunch of musicians he’d been playing with on and off for about four years. It was to this house I set out for, having nowhere else to go.

I walked along the dimly lit streets on my way to the house where he and other people I knew were living. As I came up to the front door, I had to pass a window where the curtains were open. I glanced in, and saw John sitting up in bed smoking his pipe. My best friend Sheila was snuggled up under the covers next to him and he was stroking her long black hair.

I hurriedly left in case they saw me. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t even really walk. My body was doubled over with the physical pain of my breaking heart.

After I managed to gather myself enough to stand, I wandered the streets. It had been raining and the streetlights reflected in the water on the roads. I sat down on the edge of the footpath; there was nowhere to go. Fine rain started falling cold on my head and shoulders. I drew my legs close to my body, wrapping my arms around them so that as little of me as possible would get wet. The dark pit of hopelessness in my heart filled my mind. Neon reflected raindrops spilled on my face mixing with my tears, as I directed my prayer upwards.

‘Father... help me...’ I whispered.

A few minutes later a voice behind me said, 'Need a place to stay?' I looked around and saw the silhouette of a man in a doorway. 'Come on in out of the rain,' he called. Inside I met his wife who was just going up the stairs in her dressing gown. He gave me the couch and a blanket. 'There you are, you can sleep here for now.'

'Thank you,' I said, pulling the blanket over me. He followed his wife up the stairs.

In the middle of the night he came downstairs and turned on the kitchen light which woke me up straight away.

'Want a cup of coffee?' he asked.

'Yes' I said. I hadn't eaten anything.

He made the coffees and sat down and started talking when suddenly his wife came flying down the stairs yelling. 'What are you doing? I know what you're up to. Same old story.'

Then she turned on me. 'Get out, you slut, go on, get out now!'

I took off out the door as fast as I could, away from the yelling behind me.

It was still raining but at that moment I saw someone I knew coming out of a house opposite. He said I could stay at his place and use his bed until he got back in a few days. I went in feeling relieved. A bed! Sheets! Safety! Even though it smelt like he'd just gotten out of it I couldn't have cared less. Nice warm flannelette sheets and a pillow; it was perfect. I slept like a baby for a couple of days, only waking slightly when I heard the other housemates' voices. I even sneakily used the guy's toothbrush, but once again, I had to move on.

Across the road and down the street a couple were looking for a boarder and I got a room in their house. I got a job in a factory pouring shampoo into bottles and even started to decorate my room, putting up

some big posters of the surf with sticky tape. After a week of working and living in this new place, I came home one night and found the couple in the kitchen with syringes.

‘Come and help us,’ he said. ‘Can you hold this strap for me?’

I was horrified that they would do such a thing to each other and told them I didn’t want to. Later that night, my landlord made excuses to kick me out. ‘You don’t suit this place,’ he said. ‘You’re too strange.’

I was really upset. Sobbing, I gathered my new toothbrush and duffle bag of clothes and decided to go back around to the house where John was staying. When I got there the place was full of stoned, happy talking people. When I came in, though, John didn’t want to talk to me.

I started to cry. ‘Please, please can we be friends’ I begged, holding out my hand.

‘Your hand’s too big,’ he said and refused me. I felt shattered, broken and humiliated.

One of the boys in the band watched the whole thing and after John left the house this boy said, ‘Come here, Lesley, into my room.’

He took me into his bed, got on top and had sex with me. I didn’t know if he enjoyed it, but I was quietly sobbing the whole time. I didn’t feel pleasure or love, but I thought I had to do it, so that he would let me stay with him and I would have a home. The next morning before he left, he said coldly, ‘Don’t be in my bed when I get back!’

I felt cheap, like a filthy piece of dirt, not worth keeping.



Unable to find anywhere to stay, I also couldn’t get any peace in my heart or mind. The city was full of people from other countries who seemed to have

new cars and homes. Where did we all come from, I wondered. I had a thought that if I just got on the road and got rides in trucks, I could sleep while I was travelling; I wouldn't have to keep looking for a place of my own.

On my first trip I hitched a ride on a truck all the way from Sydney to Melbourne in one go. When I got to the truck depot I just asked around and got a ride back to Sydney again. Drivers would buy me a pie, or I just went without food. It was on the second trip back that the driver pulled into a truck stop to stay the night. He was very kind and arranged a bed for me in the drivers' quarters. I was exhausted and flaked out immediately, only to be woken up by a young guy trying to get into my bed.

'Get out!' I yelled at him, but he tried to persist. 'Come on, you're no virgin.'

'No!' I was ready to fight him, but the other man came in and told him to get out.

On the next journey I decided to disguise myself as a man so that I would be safe. I blackened my face to look like I had a beard and put on a man's hat I'd found. I was fortunate to get a lift in a car all the way out to the country with a man and his children.

'How far are you going?' the driver asked.

I used my male voice, speaking very low and rough. 'As far as I can,' I said.

'Would you like to stay at my place tonight and have dinner with us? You can have the spare bed and sleep in the children's room.'

'Yes,' I answered, in my best man's voice, and followed him and his two children into the kitchen.

'Here is a towel and a flannel,' he said. 'You can wash your beard off with them.' I felt my face go red with embarrassment, but when I came out

of the bath room he had a table set with hot food on it. I sat with this kind man and his children and ate silently. He didn't ask me any questions about myself, but just chatted with his children, occasionally looking to see my reaction. After dinner he showed me the children's room and my bed next to their bunks. When the light went out, I began telling the children stories about the fairies that made their clothes out of flower petals and how the flowers all had different songs. I told them how light flowed like a stream around the trees when the sun came up and about the kangaroo that lost her joey and found him again.

The next morning the man dropped me back on the highway on his way to school and work. He didn't say anything except, 'God bless your journey.'

One cloudless day, the Pacific Highway had plenty of cars going north. The next lift I got was with a man who asked me if I wanted to have a cup of tea at his house just along on the road. He seemed friendly enough, so I said 'okay'. I just wanted a cup of tea.

I sat at his kitchen breakfast bench and sipped tea from a teacup and saucer listening to his softly spoken words about what it was like for him when he lived on the land. He explained that he had just recently bought this house.

Then he popped the question. 'Would you stay here with me? I wouldn't put any pressure on you.'

'No,' I said straight away, without even thinking about it. I was on a freedom search from the pain that tormented my every moment.

'I will give you my house and land,' he said, opening his arms wide directing my attention to his beautiful house and the green pasture next to it.

‘No, I can’t,’ I told him. ‘I don’t love you and I won’t use you for your house. I have to go now. Sorry and thank you for the cup of tea,’ I said, as politely as I could. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. I understood his loneliness because I had the same pain in my heart.

Walking along the highway with my thumb out at dusk, a Rolls Royce pulled up beside me and wound the window down. There were two young, well-dressed men, in the front.

‘Need a lift?’ the driver asked. I must have looked frightened because he was quick to say, ‘You will be safe with us.’

He got out and opened the door for me without pressuring me to get in. I didn’t feel afraid, so I got in.

I never thought I would ever ride in such a rich car and I felt out of place. As I watched and listened to the men talking to each other I decided they must be very rich indeed. Soon enough, we pulled up in front of a flash brick house. When I stood inside the front door I was amazed at the size of the room. There was a sprawling lounge and a beautifully decorated fireplace with a well-lit fire burning. There was a step up to doors leading off to other rooms. One of the men went away and came back with a set of pyjamas for me, as well as towels, shampoo, soap and a spare set of slacks and a jumper.

‘Follow me,’ he said. We walked up to one of the doors, which he opened. ‘This is your room and bathroom,’ he said. ‘When you are dressed, come out and have something to eat.’

Everything in the room looked new and clean. I felt so much better after taking a shower and putting on some clean clothes.

Warily I came out slowly into the lounge room where there was a plate of food on the table set out like in a restaurant. The men had finished their dinner and were sitting in front of the fire talking. Looking over his

shoulder, the man who seemed to be the one looking after me, said, 'There's your dinner.'

I sat down to the table; they left the room and didn't come back. I ate as quickly as I could so I could disappear into my room before I got into any trouble. As I laid in bed I listened and waited for danger, but my senses were bathing in the delicious smell and feel of clean white sheets. Even though there was quietness and my tummy was full, I still fell asleep waiting for trouble.

Very early the next morning they asked me if I would like to be dropped back on the road near town. They never asked me my name or where I came from or where I was going. I was pleased that I wasn't important to them; being invisible made me feel safe.

Here you are, Miss. Good bye,' they said, leaving me standing beside the road and they off.



The town hadn't woken up yet, as I walked along the road past well-kept green front lawns. Along the footpath I came to a church sign with starting times written on it. I remembered it was Sunday and decided to sit on the grass outside and wait for it to open. The sun was getting stronger and a few cars were beginning to drive past when from around the side of the building a woman appeared.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'I'm waiting for the church to open,' I said, and she disappeared around the side of the building again.

After a few minutes she reappeared. 'The Reverend would like to invite you for breakfast?' she said, stiffly.

‘Thank you,’ I said getting up and following her.

When we got into her house, she kept her distance from me being careful not to touch me. ‘Go in there and wash your hands,’ she said, pointing her finger to the outside bathroom but holding her hand high in case she accidentally brushed against me.

After I washed, she led me to a small room where there was a table set with breakfast things. Her husband and a dark-skinned man were sitting at the table deep in a conversation about the future. I could tell the wife was very excited to have the other minister as a guest and I could also tell that she was a little embarrassed to have me sitting at the table. She plopped food on my plate while she spoke kindly and friendly to her other guests, offering seconds to them and laughing at any joke the men made.

I was listening and taking in all this when suddenly the Reverend startled me by asking me a question.

‘What do you think the future will be after Jesus comes back?’

I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, so I just shrugged my shoulders, put my head down and continued to feel out of place.

It was then that the dark-skinned minister, who I found out was from New Guinea, stated that he thought in the future, transport would be all by trams. They continued talking about things that went straight over my head until it was time to go into church.

I sat in the back of the nearly full church, not having had any conversation with anyone. As usual, I felt quite alone. The visiting minister started talking about how materialism was bad and we in western societies wasted what we had because we had too much. Mostly though, he talked about how we were all sinful. I knew I was full of sin and the more he talked about it the more I felt condemned. I couldn’t find a way to fix my

sin problem from his words. He ended his sermon with 'You are all sinners!'

I hit the road before I embarrassed the Minister's wife any further. I felt worse than when I went into the church.

I had nowhere to go. I had no way to make myself clean.

I had no way to get my baby back.



A man and his wife picked me up along the road. She was so nice and talked a lot to me, but I didn't talk; I couldn't talk. My soul had fallen into a dark well and I couldn't see out. They took me to their small home and sat me down at the table in front of a plate of food. The whole time she happily chattered away to her man, lighting the candles for light as the sun went down. When I asked if I could use the toilet, she opened the back door and I saw a shed down in the back yard. Between the door and the shed there was mud, with snorting pigs walking around in it. She said that they were her income.

During the candlelit conversation she found out that it was my twenty first birthday. The darkness in the room seemed stronger than the light in the silence that followed. 'Twenty-one! Oh!' she said, staring at me with a mystified look. Then, in her cheery way she said, 'We have a bottle of champagne, let's celebrate.' She lit an extra candle and toasted me, wishing me health and happiness.

When the meal was finished, I said, 'Thank you, but I have to go.'

'Oh!' she said. 'But you can stay with us if you like?'

'No, I can't,' I said, getting up from the table and throwing my bag over my shoulder.

‘But where will you go?’ she asked, so concerned and kindly.

I couldn’t explain to her what was going on inside my heart. ‘Thank you but I have to go,’ I said.

As I was hitching along the Princes Highway, not long after that day, I saw a service station and went in to ask if I could use the toilet. The man engaged me in conversation, and then asked me a question. Did I want a job caring for his disabled daughter?

‘Oh,’ I replied. I didn’t know what else to say. I felt that I wasn’t ready for the weight of responsibility.

‘All I’m asking is for you to help me with my daughter so that I can keep the petrol station going.’

I hesitated, and then he said, ‘Look I have to go to up to Sydney on business tonight. Will you come with me and stay in the motel, while I go to the meeting? You can think about my offer overnight. We will have dinner in the restaurant when we get there, and you will have your own room.’

The offer of having somewhere definite to stay, with food, sounded very good to me, so I nodded and waited while he got organised for the journey.

After we had arrived and finished dinner in the motel, he took his daughter to their double room and put me into a single room. I lay there in the dark feeling like I was being false about caring for his daughter; I didn’t have the care for her in my heart. The control of the man weighed down on me until I just had to go. I quietly picked up my sleeping bag, got dressed and opened the door a little way to peep out and see if there was anyone around. I crept down the hall and out of the motel into the very early dawn.

The next day I walked up George Street to the Sydney City Mission and asked for some food. A nice lady gave me a small cardboard box filled with different kinds of tinned food. I thanked her and walked outside and stood

on the footpath wandering how I was going to open them. It seemed sensible to ask a nearby cafe if I could borrow a can opener, but the man behind the counter was not happy and tried to wave me away. 'Go away!'

'Please,' I pleaded with him. 'I just want to open this tin.'

Unwillingly he handed me a can opener.

'...And can I borrow a spoon?' I added. 'I'll give it back.'

He was doubly angry, but he gave me one.

I sat on the steps of the cafe and opened a can of corn which I ate with the spoon. I placed the other cans on my bag and gave him back the opener and the spoon when I had finished eating. He looked surprised to get them back.



There was nothing in the city for me. I was continually driven by a feeling of always having to run away, along with the need to search for my baby. I had a recurring dream that I was searching for my baby in a house that was on fire and when I found him, he was dead. In my heart I really wanted to live in the country and work on a farm, so when I picked up my next dole cheque in Sydney, I caught the bus up to Byron Bay to find my brother.

He was well known in Byron so after asking around town I soon found out he was staying in an old rambling country cottage that he rented along a river. For a few days I ate his food and what he had growing in the garden until it ran out and I had to walk into town to buy some more.

I was standing in the health food shop when a man walked in and stood in front of me. He had long, dark greying hair and a shabby straggly beard. He flashed his watery blue eyes at me and told me his name was Graham. I

believed he was a truthful person and not too long after our first meeting we were hanging out together.

First, we went to a house full of people talking about health food, tarot cards, natural childbirth and eastern religion. The woman who owned the house was about thirty and had just had her first baby. She was raving on about how she was going to teach him to fast from birth.

During the day, Graham asked me if I would help him get to the Hari Krishna Temple in Melbourne. He said he was planning to buy a car off one of the women visiting this house next week. Because he said he needed help, I said yes, and we spent the days together, with him teaching me how to make ghee and a little bit about Krishna. I wasn't really interested in all that. I just wanted someone who was truthful.

About a week later we went back to the house where Graham negotiated a price for buying the car. I don't know why the girl was crying when she sold it to him for \$90; I didn't hear what he said to her, as all the time I was waiting for him I could hear a baby wailing upstairs. Recognising the sounds of a sick baby, I went straight up to find him and was like an angry mumma bear when I saw the little baby whimpering in the bassinet, his mother sitting watching him.

'What are you doing?' I asked her.

'I'm teaching him to wait and be satisfied,' she said.

My anger rose to just under violence. 'You feed him now or I will take him off you,' I shouted.

She nearly fell off the chair grabbing him. 'Okay, okay, I will,' she said, putting him straight to her breast.

A few days later Graham and I were about to set off when we dropped into the woman's house. She was sitting in her lounge room with her baby on her breast. Straight away, her face lit up with a beautiful smile. 'Look

how healthy he is?' She held him up for me to see. 'I haven't stopped feeding him and I am so happy, thank you.'

Chapter Twelve

Graham and I set off for the Hari Krishna temple together, driving all the way to Mildura where we got some work grape picking. All the grapes were covered in some kind of white chemical but that didn't stop me from eating as many as I could; there was nothing else to eat. We slept in the fruit pickers' barn, and then, later along the road, in a farmer's hay shed, which was so comfortable. On the way, we also stopped in at my Grandmother's house in Brunswick. She made us welcome and even put up with the weirdness of Graham making ghee in her old kitchen.

Graham and I slept in separate rooms. On the trip, I had been expecting to have a sexual relationship with him because we were together, male and female but he didn't seem interested in my efforts in that area. I lost confidence, thinking that he saw me as unsexual. He seemed to think that my grandmother and her house was there only for his use because he served Krishna.

Soon, we were ready to go to the temple. I went with Graham, as I had agreed at the beginning of this journey, but upon arriving at the door, I turned around to walk away. 'I am *not* interested in becoming a Hari

Krishna,' I thought to myself, 'and I *can* leave him here because I have done what he asked of me and helped him get here.'

'Wait,' Graham called out to me, and I turned back to see a man with a thin ponytail sticking up from the top of his otherwise bald head, opening the door. After the exchange of a few mumbled words with the man, Graham looked back. 'Can you come in with me and stay for just three weeks to see if I like it?'

I said yes, sighing under my breath. It seemed a reasonable request that he wanted to check it out, I thought. Even though I wanted to leave, I would stay, just until he decided what he wanted to do.

The man with the funny ponytail took me into an office and sat me down in front of an older man who looked like he was in charge. Leaning back in his large office chair, behind a very big desk, he fired testing questions at me.

'Do you like the world? Do you like material possessions? Are you tired of this society?'

I wondered what I was supposed to say? What silly questions! Of course. This life was nothing but suffering and I was sick of it. I didn't share my thoughts with him, however. I just agreed and answered, 'Yes.'

After hardly getting any information out of me he said, 'Okay, you can stay,' and with a wave of his hand he summoned a quiet, graceful looking girl to look after me.

I followed her up the stairs to the female quarters above the kitchen, into a room that was bare except for a row of lockers. There was also a bathroom with showers. 'Wait here,' she said, and few minutes later she returned with a bundle in her arms.

'Take this sari. It was mine, but you can have it. Also here is your sandalwood soap, towel, blanket, pillow and—this is very important—your

Bhagavad Gita. Also, we don't wear panties. They are dirty things, along with men's hankies; they use them to blow their nose and then carry the snot around in their pockets.'

There was a clear routine that was followed, and Brahman devotees adhered to the rules meticulously. The day started at 3am with a cold shower and the body washed in sandalwood soap. The footprints of Krishna were marked out with dashes on the forehead, the centre of the chest, the stomach and the inside of both hands. A red dot was placed between the eyebrows to signify that you were a Brahman devotee of Krishna.

Moving onto the veranda we would sit in the breaking dawn light and chant names on the sandalwood beads until it was time to go into the temple hall and chant in front of the statues of Krishna and his family.

After a breakfast of sweets and fruit (food was always eaten with the right hand because the left hand was used to wash your private parts) we were packed into a white van, sitting on the floor so that no-one could see us and driven along, listening to chanting music, to our destination. This is where we commenced work, filling shampoo bottles and packing incense at a factory. We worked until late afternoon at which time we were shipped back to the temple and fed a tea of more sweet things and milk.

After dinner we were piled back into the vans to be taken somewhere into the city. Here we were to chant in the streets, tinkling little bells, wearing no shoes and women always walking behind the men. Some of the male devotees would wear wigs and dress like ordinary people to sell the Bhagavad Gita. After chanting in the streets, we were herded back into the van to the temple where we had reading lessons in Sanskrit and educated about demi-gods and such things. Finally, we hit the floor at eleven o'clock.

After living at the Temple for two months I could read Sanskrit and I had learned the Hari-Krishna belief of how the universe was put together by the demi-gods. But the intense learning, working and chanting began to wear on me, and I found it deeply disturbing. On one occasion I went upstairs to a room that had shelves of pretty materials of all kinds and little dolls that were like miniature statues. It was a room where idols were made, and the sight of it made anger rise up in me. I walked around and around the little quadrangle fighting invisible forces that I thought were created in the idols.

One night, as I was sleeping, I was woken up by a demon trying to get into my body. I sat up angry. 'How dare you,' I said to it. 'How disgraceful!'

It left me and I went back to sleep.

The very next night, the floor became so hot under my body that I woke up. Girls were screaming around me, and I began choking on smoke.

'Get out now!' a male voice yelled from downstairs. I scrambled to my feet and wrapped my sari around me grabbing my Bhagavad-Gita out of my locker. Girls were pushing each other to get down the stairs. From out on the grass we watched the fire brigade put out the fire that had burnt out the kitchen underneath the women's quarters.

At the end of the third month, I was still at the temple. My heart sincerely desired to be obedient to the instructions of the Temple, and early one particular morning, I was waiting in the dawn light to follow the men in for worship. I sat outside on a cold bench with my sari hugging the contours of my body keeping me warm, faithfully chanting, 'Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna, Hari Rama, Hari Rama'. My string of sandalwood beads slid through my fingers obedient to the count. When it was time, we followed the men into the Temple room for chanting. They started first, their drums beating louder and louder, chanting the names of Krishna and Rama over

and over again. I stood with the women in the corner, holding my little oil lamp until we were instructed to join the men at the end of the line to see the curtains of the altar, opened revealing images of Krishna and his family in silver and gold glory.

As we went around and around in a line, chanting, I saw the earth appear in the centre of the circle of worshippers—but it was on fire! I was confused. No one seemed to be upset about the burning; in fact, the devotees all seemed happy that the earth and all mankind were going to burn! Somehow, a single thought rose up from within me.

Jesus loves us.

The thought completely filled my mind, and I realised at that moment that I had to run. I turned and ran out of the room and out of the temple, leaving everything behind.

I ran and ran across Melbourne, from St Kilda to Brunswick with my sari flowing behind me. I ran for my life because I could see the demi-gods in the sky chasing me.

I got to my grandmother's just as she was putting the kettle on for her breakfast. She was surprised to see me.

'Quick! Do you have a Bible?' I asked her.

'Yes, I'll get it,' she said, without asking a single question. When she gave it to me, I made her read the Lord's Prayer. I needed to protect her, I thought. If I had done any damage to my grandmother by having Graham in her house, teaching about Krishna, then getting her to read the Lord's Prayer would save her from the pending attack of the demi-gods. After all, I believed, the Bible was more powerful than Krishna.

My own need to flee from the demi-gods attack meant I couldn't stay at my grandmother's. I quickly shed my sari and donned some clothes my grandmother gave me. I needed to keep moving and find a place to hide

from them, but where could I go? When I was in the temple, I had learnt that the demi-gods didn't like evil, so I headed for the evillest place I could think of—Sydney.



Getting there was easy. All I had to do was step out of my grandmother's front gate and cross the street to hitch a direct ride on the Hume Highway.

I got a truck lift that took me over the Blue Mountains. The huge semi-trailer snaked its windy way down face of the mountains' cliffs using no brakes. I sat straight upright on the seat staring out the windscreen, expecting to die as the truck sped around every corner without slowing down. I wasn't afraid, but I was quite surprised to arrive, alive, at Paddy's Markets and headed for Glebe but not before finding some good fruit to eat that had been dropped on the ground at the Markets as trucks were unloaded.

I remembered being told about some squats in that area. When I found them it was rows of seemingly vacant derelict houses. As I was looking for an open door or window to crawl in, a young man came out of a gate and stopped me. He had a thin wiry build, his face was carved in permanent worry lines and his eyes were a worried, pale blue. He immediately assessed that I was looking for somewhere to sleep and after spending a few minutes stuttering and trying to get the words out he offered me a back room in his house.

The young guy had turned one of the two-story houses into a comfortable place to live. I followed him through the front door into a room that had kites hanging from every inch of the ceiling, on walls and

half made ones on the bench. He pranced around them pointing to each one and chattering a little story about them.

‘C-come t-through,’ he stammered, nervously looking back over his shoulder every second. He showed me a bed in the back room, which opened out under a staircase.

‘Thank you.’ I sat down, my bag in front of me for defence.

‘R-rest, m-make yourself at home. Y-you’re safe.’ He hurriedly left me, going back to the front room where he played with his kites.

I huddled on the bed with my few possessions around me before I spread out my sleeping bag, made a pillow with my clothes and lay down to sleep. I had my periods and I was in pain all night until the next morning. Early I went out the back door looking for a hose or a tap to wash. When I came back, he had lit a small fire in the backyard. As I walked over, I saw all my things in it, burning; my clothes, old gumboots, sleeping bag and pads.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. “Now I have nothing,” I thought, and my heart felt like it was breaking.

The young man came out of the house towards me, half crouching, with fear on his face.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Y-you m-must be a w-witch,’ he stuttered. ‘I know you are. I heard you m-mumblin another l-language.’

I kept staring at the fire and then I looked at his frightened, worried face and shook my head walking away. He called after me but I ignored him.

I had lost my possessions, but my plan to be safe from the demi-gods in evil Sydney was working. Quickly I found a place with two men and a pregnant girl, who were sitting on an old lounge drinking wine and smoking rollies. ‘Come in,’ they said, nearly all at once. They became my

self-destructive drinking mates for a couple of weeks; in this time, a bottle of Stones Green Ginger wine was my breakfast, lunch and tea.

These three new friends were exactly what I was hoping would stave off an attack of the demi-gods. The pregnant woman was doing everything she could not to have a healthy baby and ended up giving birth to a child with fingers missing. I felt deeply disturbed by her thinking so little about her baby, but she laughed and said she would always be able to find the little girl after she adopted her out because of the missing fingers.

One of the men said he was a warlock. Because we were drunk all the time, I didn't think about what I was doing. One day we had sex in broad daylight in the main street on the grass of the Catholic Church. After that, I missed a period and I thought I might be pregnant, so I had an abortion to make sure I didn't give birth to an evil man's child.

The other man believed he was a werewolf. I wasn't convinced until he stood outside and howled at the full moon when it came up. He didn't seem to be able to talk; the girl mostly spoke for him and controlled him from being violent, although that didn't always work.

At some point, an older man came to live in the house with us. Called Boogie Bob, he always had green snot pouring out of his nose. He had been a university professor but had had a breakdown. Werewolf put the pointy end of an umbrella through Boogie Bob's eye, taking his sight away permanently.

We all lived somewhere in the house. I slept on the lounge and later found some floor space upstairs behind a wardrobe. One night, Werewolf came up the stairs and pushed the wardrobe onto my head. There was a nail sticking out at the back of it that went into my skull. Blood poured everywhere, but I didn't get any help. That same night, Werewolf came up again. He got on top of me and penetrated me, and I couldn't stop him. I

was afraid of him and I didn't like it. The next day the girl was angry with him and told him he had raped me, but he was oblivious to the meaning of his actions. I wasn't going to fight about it either. What did it matter if I was a nothing, anyway, I thought?

An older, haggard-looking woman dressed in shredded, black dirty clothes moved into the very top room on the top floor, with a younger indigenous girl, who lived in the corner of the old woman's room. For days they fought and had fisticuffs. The younger one wanted the older one to do some magic tricks, but she wouldn't.

'Come on! Do something. Prove you've got powers,' snarled the younger girl. The old woman just sat on the dirty bed, her long straggly hair falling down her shoulders and over her face.

'Come on! F--- you, f---ing piece of s----.' She went on like this for two weeks, never letting up. Finally, the older woman flew off the bed and landed a punch on the girl so hard that she nearly killed her. 'I warned you, b----.' After that the girl never hassled her again.

The old woman found a full-length mirror and placed it downstairs. Every day she would come down the stairs and stand in front of it and try to make her reflection disappear. The more she tried and failed the more she got angry. I didn't have the nerve to tell her I could still see her.

I wondered what had happened to this woman to make her this way, and one day while she was trying to disappear, I asked her, 'Do you have any children?'

'Yeah, I have four boys.'

'Where are they?'

'In a children's home. I'm not allowed to see 'em, they took 'em off me.' She said and approached her magical work with more gusto.

Her words sparked something in me, so I rang my parents up and invited them to come and visit me, sweeping the old carpet and cleaning out the fireplace to make the place as nice-looking as I could.

When they got off the bus at the end of the street, I was so excited to see them. They didn't say much to me, but they came and that was all I needed. 'Come on in,' I invited them, and opened the door—only to stop, in shock. All over the room, someone had strewn rubbish and empty bottles.

Mum and Dad took one look and made a 180 degree turn back, along the footpath and towards the bus stop.

'Mum, Dad!' I stood in the doorway calling after them. 'Come back please? It wasn't like this before!' But they didn't come back, or even look back to me. They just left, walking straight ahead. I didn't ever find out who sabotaged the visit of my parents.

I was always hungry and any opportunity for food was never refused.

One dark night, when I had run out of candle ends, a man's face appeared on the stairs below my level. I knew who he was, but I had never spoken to him before. People in the squat called him 'the Mercenary' because he had apparently been fighting overseas.

'Come on,' he said to me. 'I know someone who is cooking up some nice stew with beef and vegetables in it. It's really nice and there's plenty for everyone.'

Slowly I slid down the steps and followed his torch light, twisting and turning around, under and over broken beams, missing walls and half-fallen-in floors.

'Just down here,' he said, in a reassuring voice.

Suddenly the only thing I could see in front of me was a long, shiny knife blade pointing to my throat. His other hand pushed me down and I fell onto an old smelly mattress, the springs digging into my back.

The knife against my throat silenced my voice, and as he groped my ragged clothes, my mind, body and soul transformed into a rock—made of solid hate. Panting with victory, he penetrated my skinny, tired body and then withdrew along with the knife. He immediately left me there, in the dark, with nothing but my hate.

I wandered up and out of the squat until a leaking hose revealed itself near a streetlight. I washed, hating him with everything I had. I washed, until it hurt.

I found some matches on the footpath, bundled papers and set the squats on fire. I wanted the whole world to burn. As the flames started catching the papers and timber, the Mercenary saw the light from the fire and came running along the road. ‘What are you trying to do? Burn everyone alive?’ he yelled, and put the fire out.

I couldn’t go back to my sleeping spot, so I left that street and went around to the second row of empty houses behind it. I came to a little city cottage, all by itself, that didn’t have any damage done to it. The whole front of the house was intact and inside, I could see a couch and carpet in front of a little fireplace. The streets and houses were all in darkness except for the occasional streetlight here and there, so I wasn’t worried about anyone seeing me break the front door to get in. I shut the door behind me, lay down on the floor and went to sleep.

The next morning, I woke to daylight filling the little house both downstairs and all the way up the staircase into a room at the top. I was very hungry, so I set about to see if there was any food. To my amazement, as I explored, I found that every wall and all the cupboards—even the

dressing table in the kitchen and the bannister on the stairs had chocolate boxes stuck to them; every one of them was unopened.

‘I’m in heaven,’ I thought and hungrily started ripping them apart. But my heaven became as empty as my hopes. I must have ripped open 100 boxes. All were fakes; there was not one little bit of chocolate in any of them.

I lit a fire in the little fireplace, which blackened all the nice, white brickwork, and sat on the floor. The person who lived here must have been mad, I decided. The hundreds of fake chocolate boxes confirmed to me that the entire world was fake and any future I might have would be fake too.

That night I wandered down the street, looking for food in the garbage bins and picking up cigarette butts that people had thrown away. There wasn’t much food in the bins so when I saw a man standing at the back of a pub in the alley, I asked him, ‘Can you give me some money for food?’

He looked at me, considering for a few moments. Just as I thought he was going to give me something, he said, ‘Yeah, if you do a sexual act for me, I’ll give you \$50.’

That was like a million dollars to me; it could buy heaps of food for days.

‘Okay.’

He stood in the dark part of the alley and I did what I had to do. When it finished, he zipped up his pants and turned to go back into the pub.

‘Hey!’ I called to him. ‘What about the money?’

He turned around as he went up the steps. ‘Get away, slut.’

I fell to my knees in the darkness and cried in humiliation and hunger as he disappeared behind the closing door.

Later that night I managed to get a few dollars from begging, but by then I had forgotten about the hunger of my body. Now I felt only the hunger in my soul. I bought a bottle of wine and was drinking it, walking back to my little fake house when I spotted something leaning on a fence.

A pushbike. No lights. But that didn't matter. I got on it and rode. I was going to ride the 360 miles to the bush, I decided. I had gotten down as far as Sutherland when a police car pulled me up. A policeman who looked younger than me got out of the car.

'Where are you going?'

'South Coast,' I said.

'Well I'm sorry,' he said. 'I will have to take you back to your home. Someone has reported you as a drunken bike rider and I think you are quite drunk.'

He took the bike and put it into the boot. 'Get in,' he said.

I sat in the front with him and when I looked down to see why my foot was hurting, I realised it was covered in blood. I had been knocking it on the road every time I pedalled. He asked me where I lived and got me to show him the way. I began to sober up as we drove along.

'I'm getting out of the Police force when I get back,' he told me. 'I'm only 21 and I don't want to be in it now. It's too corrupt.' He talked all the way home. I enjoyed listening to someone else who didn't like wrong, but when he dropped me off at my cottage, in the dark with the bike I felt cursed. There was obviously nothing I could do to save myself from this life in hell.

Over the next couple of days many of the hopeless young started hanging around in another house, sharing drugs. One night there were about 20 people sitting around the rooms. I was sitting on the floor taking

whatever joint was going. I had never taken heroin and I didn't ask for it, but when I was quite 'out of it' on dope, someone stuck a needle in my arm.

The effects were intense. I was leaning up against the wall just near the front door, with sweat coming out through my hair and dripping down my body. It felt like rain made from light, showering my mind, but I knew it was a false light and this feeling of joy was a false joy—a counterfeit for real joy.

Just as I felt I was going to pass out, two men in black suits came in through the door, silently took me outside and sat me in the back seat of a car. One of them got in with me and the other drove. The man next to me rubbed the top of my spine at the base of my head, my mind went in and out of consciousness. When the car stopped, and I got out, I saw, to my surprise, that they had brought me back to the little house I was staying in. I didn't know how they knew where I was living. By the time they had driven away, I was completely straight and unaffected.



'I don't deserve to live when my baby is dead,' I said, over and over to myself. It was the constant thought in my mind. It was so insistent that I forgot about food. Every bit of money that came my way was spent on wine. I drank and drank, so I wouldn't have to think, or be, or feel.

One day I found myself lying, sprawled on a footpath and I couldn't remember how I got there. As I became conscious enough to be aware of my surroundings, I half-opened my eyes and noticed people stepping around me.

It felt like I was paralysed and I couldn't lift any part of my body—not even a finger. As I became more conscious, however, I could feel the cold of

the dirty concrete, hard under me. My eyes travelled upwards, taking in the city buildings and houses around me. The sun was high in the sky; it was mid-afternoon by this time. I was suffering from alcoholic poisoning.

As I looked up between the buildings towards the blue sky, only one thought flooded up from deep within me filling my mind.

‘I love God so much!’

On the strength of this love I suddenly was able to move.

Immediately I went straight to a telephone box and rang Mum reverse charges.

‘Can I go and live at Momma’s?’ I asked her. ‘Yes,’ she said, and arranged for me to pick up a train ticket from Central Station.

Chapter Thirteen

Living with my grandmother wasn't the most pleasant experience, but it was a change, and it was a start. She gave me the 'middle room', which had the same piles of boxes piled up to the ceiling as when I was a child. The only difference was that now the mice had eaten homes into them, and they smelt bad! The only window in the room was blocked from the outside by old furniture, stacked higgledy-piggledy, high up to the roof of the kitchenette, waiting for a family member to need it.

In my room was a double bed about 100 years old, an old dark brown wardrobe filled with clothes from another century, the boxes and a cane commode with a very old porcelain pot in it. If I used it at night, I emptied it in the outside toilet, which had never been cleaned. There was no inside bathroom, just a home-made space, with walls with gaps, and a chip heater that was used to heat water for a bath or shower.

In the laundry I boiled the water in the copper and used a washboard to scrub my clothes and sheets. My grandmother boiled her panties on the stove for hours, the sunlight soap she used sending an odour of soapy urine

through the house. She and I got on either end of a two-man saw to cut firewood for the fireplace and the copper.

The whole house was dark and mysterious. Collections of guns, tea sets, ornaments and jewellery, brought home by the men who had fought in two World Wars were everywhere. Everything was dirty; the walls and all the glassed paintings were covered in a smoky, yellowy-brown, oily film from the coal briquettes used for the fire. Momma's dog, Billy, was kept in the overgrown back yard in the old unused chook pen. One couldn't get to him unless you walked through dog poo.

My grandmother usually huddled next to a smouldering kitchen fire sitting on a little stool, trying to take the pain out of her crippling osteoporosis. Her other seat was at the kitchen table, a placemat covering her pile of papers which had to be kept secret from everyone. (My grandmother was furiously possessive, and *no one* was allowed to touch anything in the house.) She sat at the table for hours every night, waiting for her son to come home from the pub. Her whole life's purpose was to keep him out of jail even though he hadn't been in Pentridge for 20 years.

Momma never had a shower or bath. She made do with a wash in hot water using a bowl in the bathroom. Her finger and toenails were long and brown. She couldn't lift her arms up to put her dresses on without crying out in pain and she was blind in one eye. (Actually, her brother, the cat and the dog were all blind in one eye too, the left one. I expected it to happen to me one day.)

Although Momma was only 77 years old, she was very sick because her crippled feet prevented her from walking. She was also bowel incontinent, so much so that she was dropping nuggets on the floor without noticing. I tried to clean them up without her knowing so as not to embarrass her. Not a soul from the family had visited my grandmother for 20 years except for

my mother, who went down a couple of times a year to set her hair and clean up. This would be my new home for the next little while.

I needed my life to change or I didn't want to live. The day after I arrived, I walked across the road to a small sewing factory where they gave me a job straight away. It was owned and run by survivors of the Holocaust. I was the only Australian; the other women working there couldn't speak English.

John came and visited me one night, but he wouldn't come in. I had to stand outside, next to his car. I had given up any hope of us getting back together again and I was puzzled as to why he came, but while we were talking, he noticed that I couldn't stand up straight.

'Why are you bent over?' he asked.

I put my hand on my pelvis. 'I have a lump here and it hurts.'

'Go and get it seen to,' he said, and then left.

I went to the doctor and was diagnosed with an infected uterus, ovaries and gallbladder. Even though I was only 23, they booked me in for a hysterectomy. I believed in herbs, so I rang the Natural Medicine Association of Victoria to ask if they knew anyone who could help me. They said they were not allowed to recommend any practitioner in particular, but they gave me an address anyway.

I took the train, travelling some way out into the bush, then walked for about an hour until I came to a little cottage surrounded by rambling roses and flowering herbs. When I knocked on the door a shy, white-haired old man and woman poked their heads out.

'Yes?' they said, in unison. I explained my sickness and they invited me in and told me to sit at the table.

The old man went into another room, and came back after a while with a little brown bottle which had a dropper for a lid.

‘Here, take one drop three times a day.’ He looked at me curiously. ‘Do you believe in God?’

‘Yes,’ I said without hesitation.

Nothing more was said, and I made my way back to Brunswick.

The next day was Sunday and I asked my Grandmother if there was a church nearby.

‘Saint Augustine’s is our family’s church. It’s the High Church of England and your grandfather always went there.’ She never went herself, but I walked down the road and went to the service. There were only old people there and they behaved as if they had been doing the same thing for years. I was not sure what was going on or what I was supposed to do. I didn’t feel like I fitted in.

I found a little bible in my bedroom and began trying to read it in bed at night, but I couldn’t get past the wars and all the ‘begats’ and ‘begots’. I found it very frustrating. As well as that, I was beginning to get angry. Each night before I went to sleep, I lay in bed and cursed the man who raped me. I cursed *all* men, in fact. All of them had mistreated me and taken advantage of me. I hated men with a passionate hatred. Even here at Momma’s place, I had to stop having showers at the house when I noticed my Uncle peeping through the gaps in the wall.

‘Get away, you dirty old man!’ I yelled at him. It cost me a dollar to have a bath at the Brunswick Council Baths once a week, but I never showered at my grandmother’s again.

I truly hated men and the society I lived in. On the weekends I walked for miles engrossed in anger and cursing, stomping my feet hard on the ground purposely, sending a message through the cement, to the city of how much I hated it.

I went back to St Augustine's again. This time the Bishop was taking the service, dressed in gold and silver and purple. When it finished and everyone was leaving, they lined up to shake his hand.

'Blessings go with you,' he told each one, as they passed by. When it was time for me to receive whatever he was giving out, I put my hand out expecting him to shake it, but he put his hand behind his back.

'Huh,' he grunted, looking to the next person in line. I decided that I must be too full of sin. He could probably see the filth on me. I didn't go back. When my girlfriend E wrote me, a letter explaining that she had so much joy now because she had found Jesus, I wrote back to her and told her I didn't want anything to do with religion. I was only interested in God himself.

In the meantime, I faithfully took the drops from the herbalist, three times a day, eating rissoles my grandmother gave me for breakfast, lunch and tea. She suddenly had purpose in her life—looking after me—and her pain began to be reduced. She could lift her arms above her head and not cry out when she was getting dressed.

Things were getting better for me, as well. I worked hard for 17 months without thinking of drinking or taking drugs. My lump had gone down with my herbal drops, and the infection had gone away. I worked hard all week to get bonuses and was able to pay my board and save \$4000 which I kept in a little tin in my room.

With so much in savings, I decided to move on and take a different job, out west as a nanny. However, I had a letter from Sheila, the girl I had found in bed with John five years before. She was still living on the farm in the Snowy Mountains, now with a family of her own and a mud brick house she had built. I still had a share in the company title of the property,

and she told me that I could build a house up the hill from the back of her place.

It seemed like a wonderful opportunity to get away from people and be only with God.

‘I’m sorry, Momma,’ I told my grandmother. ‘I have to go back to the bush.’

She was hurt and disappointed that I was leaving. She thought there was no future for me out in the bush. She herself had left the rugged West Coast of Tasmania when she was 17 for the convenience of city life, and couldn’t understand that someone might not want to stay in the city. However, my mind was made up. I was headed to the farm, to be with God.



I bought a trunk and made a list of things I’d need to put in it, including the marcasite watch my toothless boyfriend had given me ten years before. Once I’d packed it with kitchen supplies, materials to build a billycart (for carting rocks) and sleeping things, I had it sent by courier to Trevor’s place until I arrived.

In the meantime, I took the train back to Woy Woy to my parent’s house. Dad was home and very friendly, especially when I asked him if he needed any money.

‘Yes, come down the street with me,’ he said happily. ‘You can pay our electricity bill for us.’ While we were there, he told me that Mum needed a new washing machine and a new set of saucepans on a stand. I was happy to get them for her.

They had turned my pink bedroom into a dining room and painted the walls green. We sat and had a meal together, but I still found it difficult to

talk to them about anything. My world was far away from theirs.

I still had some things to get before I left for the farm, including some transport. I bought a little red Mini Minor and had lessons to get my driver's license. While I was reversing out of the front yard it got stuck in the sand. 'Go around the street and ask someone for help,' Mum said.

I managed to get help from the family around the corner who drove semi-trailers for a living. Four giant, muscled brothers followed me back to my parents' place, lifted my mini out of the sand and carried it on to the road, then slowly walked away waving me goodbye. I was very grateful.

I took off as soon as I could, with my mini packed to the brim. If my parents were worried about me going back, they didn't let on.

Chapter Fourteen

The drive was long and tiring. The little car was loaded up and only had a small motor. When I came to the ascent of Brown Mountain it had no power to get up, so I had to get out and push. About 100 cars were stuck behind me on a slow crawl that seemed to take forever. Surprisingly no one tooted or abused me. The higher up the mountain I went the air became purer and purer, giving life to my lungs and strength to my body.

I finally arrived at Amy and Trevor's place in Towamba where my trunk was. I was disappointed to find that someone had broken into my trunk and stolen my watch, but Amy and Trevor were generous with their hospitality, and let me have a bed on their couch as long as I bought their food every night. I was grateful, and at night, I lay listening to my heartbeat, and thanking God the life flowing through my body, that I knew I didn't deserve.

After two months I realised that my money would soon run out, so I packed my car again and headed for the farm in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains.

It was dark when I arrived except for the starlight, and there wasn't a soul around, so I had to find a spot on the side of the road to sleep. I managed to lay down some bracken to make a soft bed, but in the middle of the night I woke up hearing music like a harmonic orchestra. My head was spinning and I could hear blood throbbing around my head. When I sat up, I fell over. I discovered that I had accidentally slept with my head lower than my feet and somehow my balance was wobbly. I couldn't stand up for the next whole day without falling over so in the end I just had to lie in my sleeping bag and wait for it to pass.

The next afternoon I managed to walk up to Sheila and Tom's place. It had been seven years since the day John and I were dropped off here, on the run from the police, and six years since Charlie had died. I felt like I had lived a number of life-times, while nothing much had changed here. The shareholders had all carried on, building homes and lives for their families.

During our cup of tea, Sheila offered me a joint from their homegrown crop. When she passed it to me, I could feel the old familiar fear, pumping my heart faster.

'No, thanks,' I said. I hadn't smoked anything or had any alcohol in 17 months and I really wanted to stay clean.

'Come on,' she said. 'I'll take you up to where I think it would be a nice spot for you to build your house.'

We walked up a steep track behind her house, struggling through a forest of tea tree. After about 15 minutes we came out onto a small, sloped, grassy plateau. The beauty and abundance of flowering trees and shrubs overwhelmed me. When I raised my eyes to look further, I could see miles and miles over the mountaintops into the endless blue sky. There was not one house, power pole or road anywhere.

‘Perfect,’ I said.

I set up my camp in the shed, living on soya beans, flat bread and dandelion coffee with powdered milk. The first thing I had to do was clear a road for my car through the thick undergrowth before I could even begin building. After that, I’d have to construct a shelter for myself. Looking through the donated books on the shelves I found one on how to build a simple room and wrote a list of things I needed to buy.

Wedges

Axe

Saw

Forked hammer

Level

Nails and hand drill

Chisel

Mattock

Tape measure

Tin food

Bags of cement

Creosote

Nail head Crowbar (6’ long)

I planned to go into Eden the next day and buy what I needed. After cooking my beans on the fire, I climbed into my sleeping bag with a flicker of hope in my heart. But in the middle of the night I was woken up by a noise that alarmed all my senses. It was the creeping, slithering, sliding sounds of a predatory creature getting closer and closer to my bed. I lay frozen in fear, even too afraid to breathe. I could see nothing in the pitch black but instinct told me if I moved, I would give away my position and be suddenly, mercilessly pounced upon. It seemed like forever as I listened to

its body, stealthily sliding along and around the timbers, from one end of the shed to the other, lining me up for attack. Then I could hear more than one. No! It was two... no, three. Four or more.

‘There’s only one thing to do,’ I thought to myself. ‘Run!’

I ran for my life, out of and away from, the peril-filled darkness of the shed, into the uncertain blackness of the night, my sleeping bag dragging behind me. Fortunately, the dirt road slightly caught the dim light of the stars so I could see a little of where I was going. I followed it until I thought I came to the track leading up to the house of David and his new wife, on the top of the next mountain. I decided to go straight up, fighting my way through rough barked trees and unkind undergrowth, until I came to a little caravan at the bottom of their garden. I crawled in and laid down in my bag, feeling I had quite escaped danger.

The next morning David popped his head in the door. ‘Coming up for porridge?’

The fireplace was warm and welcoming, with a big pot of porridge on it. Toasting irons were filled with homemade bread.

‘There was something crawling around the shed last night,’ I explained, my hands wrapped around a hot cup of tea.

‘I’ll go and check it out for you,’ he said. When he came back, he had news. I was right. I had heard the movements of a nest of baby brown snakes and their mother who had made the shed their home. ‘I’ve killed them all,’ he reassured me. ‘You can safely sleep there now.’

‘I guess I’ll go into Eden and buy my tools,’ I said.

A slightly overweight, red-nosed man served me in the hardware store. His blank stare was pregnant with mockery, as I read my list to him. He led me to each tool section and leaned back on the counter watching me as I looked over them to choose what I needed, his grin growing more and

more cynical. His air of amusement grew and grew until I asked for \$1,200 worth of mountain ash tongue-and-groove floorboards.

‘And a thousand bucks worth of tin for a roof,’ I added.

After that he stood to attention and took me seriously.

This was my task, and I would achieve it. I had no choice but to put my hand to the grindstone and build my own place to live. I had nowhere else to go. Here, though, I had a place to call my own and I had God to myself, all the time. Every morning I looked to the sky and kissed Him. Every night I thanked Him.

Armed with mattock and axe, I attacked the first Tea Tree bush, which was really more like a tree, about eight feet high, with a ten-inch circumference at the base. I dug and chopped and hacked until I pulled out a gnarled taproot over two feet long. Even the little, new seedling Tea Trees had taproots that clung defiantly to the earth. The work required all my strength to wrestle them out of the ground. Every large tree had a hundred little trees coming up around it. Day after day I did the same work from sunrise until sunset. I was determined not to finish until I had cleared the 200 yards of steep mountain brush out of the hard-packed ground.

As soon as I had made the road I drove into Eden and bought some second hand weatherboards enough to clad a 12 by 16foot room.

Using string, I marked out where I wanted to have my cabin and followed the instructions from the book to dig nine three-feet holes for the stumps. Mica in the hard, gravelly ground made my clothes and arms glitter gold in the sun. The only place to wash was in the creek. The autumn water temperatures were cool, about minus three degrees and at first it was a shock to my body but after a while I got used to it and found it refreshing. Besides, there was a platypus in the creek and the snakes were beginning to hibernate.

My next task was to find hardwood trees suitable for stumps and bearers. Tom said he would throw them on the back of his truck and drop them at my place if they were easy for him to get to. The trees along the road looked pretty good to me, and easy to access, so I chose the straightest one, closest to the road. Looking up the height of the trunk I wondered if I could get nine six-foot posts out of it. I could only try.

My sharp axe cut through the thick green bark easily, making a substantial gash into one side for my wedge. Around the other side of the tree I chopped below so I could direct where I wanted it to fall.

For half a day I chopped and sliced into the tree. Not a soul came along the road all morning. All around me the bush hushed, as if poised for the death of one of its own, ready to go into mourning. Not a bird or animal could be heard or seen. Finally, at last, the tree gave in to my attack and began creaking. There were sharp ripping sounds, as wood was rent from wood. Then gravity took control. I stepped back to a safe distance, exhausted. The tree took only two seconds before it landed with a bang and a thud—right across the road.

I had to quickly bark it now and cut it up into posts before anyone came along. I turned my axe over and bashed the bark along the tree to loosen it and then pulled it off like skin off a chicken. After working all afternoon, using all my strength, and with sweat pouring off me, I finally finished and rolled nine six-foot stumps to the side of the road.

The icy cold water of the creek washed off the dirt and sweat from my body. The next morning, I repeated the procedure, this time creating three floor bearers, each 16 feet long.

After my friend dropped off the timber, stumps and bearers at my site, I proceeded to dig the holes for the stumps. I put them into the ground, after first pouring in the powdered cement and painting them in creosote. I used

the round end of the posthole digger to ram the earth around the stumps. Levelling the long bearers on was easy but cutting in and chiselling every hardwood floor bearer, being careful to keep them level, was very hard and took all my patience and endurance. It took me three weeks to finish the job and I was covered in grazes, cuts and splinters.

Next, I assembled my little cart and collected granite rocks for the fireplace. After doing this for three days I found I had strained my hands and couldn't move them. I was unable to clean my teeth or prepare food and had to wait in the shed until my hands started working again.

For five months I lived in the shed, ate beans, and walked back and forth to my place working my body hard and growing strong. My height increased an extra half-inch and hair grew on my chest. I was in love with the feeling of the freedom in owning my own place; no one could hurt me or kick me out. I loved God. I thought that the way to the Father was through the Mother and every day I blessed the earth around me. Wombats, echidnas and goannas passed by me as I worked. Flocks of Chucks combed the undergrowth for food and flew to the tops of the trees when there was danger, calling warning sounds to each other. Sometimes the flowering gums, Tea Tree or wattles hummed with the songs of a million bees at work.

In spring as the weather warmed up, shareholders started coming back from the cities where they had worked for the winter, saving money to continue building their homes. John also came back with his new girlfriend. The gatherings started up again. Lots of music was played and lots of dope was smoked. I was smoking dope again, but on my own. People frightened me. I only liked going off by myself to sit and listen to the sounds of the bush.



My cabin

Everything was going well for me until John had the bright idea of lining me up with a local guy so as to keep me out of his hair (though I had no intention of trying to get together with him or any man). On one of the group trips to the local pub, John arranged seating and I ended up sitting on the fellow's knee. This guy was aggressive and drinking a lot, and once again, I was dumb to the consequences of my actions.

'I'll help you put your roof on your cabin,' he offered. But I didn't realise that he expected something in return. When he finished it, and I wouldn't have sex with him, he lost his temper with me.

I was staying in Tom and Sheila's house while they were away, for a few weeks. Just as I was wondering how I could get rid of this creepy guy, with his dominating, possessive angry behaviour, a car pulled up. It was James who had dug the trench for me, five years prior. 'Hi, how are you going?' he asked, leaning on his car and rolling a cigarette.

‘Well, it’s a bit tricky, actually,’ I said. I explained the problem I had gotten myself into.

‘I’ll help you get rid of him,’ he offered.

‘That would be really great.’

We sat in the kitchen until sunset waiting for roof-guy to arrive. When he walked through the door, James confronted him.

‘Lesley doesn’t want anything to do with you,’ he said.

The man looked surprised and just stood there for a bit. Then, suddenly, without ado he said, ‘Well I don’t \$#&^* care,’ and left.

That night James asked me if he could sleep on the couch. I thought that would be okay, since he got rid of the creep for me. The next day I took him up to my place after he told me he liked doing work for people. ‘I could have a look at the flooring you bought,’ he said.

James had grown into a slim, pale man with long hair. He was now 24 and had finished his carpentry apprenticeship. Every time he smoked a joint, he talked incessantly about science fiction and the structures of the universe. I had no education and I had no idea what he was talking about.

I continued to let him sleep on the couch until after three weeks he asked me if he could sleep in my bed.

‘No,’ I said.

Stomping his feet on the floor, he threw a tantrum like a child. ‘Why not? I want to just lay next to you.’

I don’t know why I did, but I gave in. ‘Okay,’ I said, and we lay on my night-and-day together. After some time, I broke the silence. ‘I’m just a husk.’

(I didn’t know how to explain to him that I felt like I was just a vessel for the light that God had put inside me. But that I was even a worthless vessel.)

‘No, you’re not!’ he said. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ But when I heard that, I lost confidence to tell him anything of more depth.

Later that night, we were sleeping when suddenly, we were woken to the sounds of revving cars, men shouting and gunshots being fired. The boys from Eden had decided to have some fun and drive out to the wilderness and terrorise the hippies. Car searchlights waved over the windows through to the walls, and we dived to the floor, laying as low as we could, until the shooting, hooting, laughing cars stopped circling the house and drove away.

It took James three weeks to finish and seal the Mountain Ash floor during which time I thought we had a great platonic friendship. When the cabin was liveable, we moved my night-and-day in and fitted all his science-fiction books into the noggins of the walls. He also realigned the roof and fitted the front door. He was a very good carpenter. All the while I cleared the land for my veggie garden. We had only been in there for a week when he laid me down on the ground amongst the bracken and had the sex, he had waited for. I gave in to him because I saw something good in him and we got along so well. Also, we both liked working together to building a home.



The people on the farm had a Company meeting once a year. I didn’t attend it that year because James didn’t want me to. He went on his own and reported back to me.

‘They’re all idiots, and nobody likes me,’ he said. ‘But I got them to agree to let me buy a half share to go with your half share. That would give

us a whole share, which will give us the right to build a house, according to Company rules.'

James and I were happy enough together, at least for now, although it did seem like the more time, we spent together the more we didn't get along. He said he had been wrongly and falsely accused for raping a teacher and expelled from school. When I put that together with the things he had said about the people in the Company, alarm bells were going off in my mind, but I ignored them.

That Christmas he took me to Sydney to meet his mum. She was lovely, as was his big sister, but she quietly whispered in my ear. 'Don't live with my brother, Lesley. He has a problem and is not quite normal.'

Again, I didn't listen.

After seeing his family, we drove up to see my parents, who seemed to be getting along. As we were leaving my mother waved us off with her hanky and called out, 'Whatever you do, don't get pregnant.'

Of course, I got pregnant.

At the end of December when I found out, I didn't feel either happy or sad. It was just another thing I had to face. When we were sitting on the edge of the garden in the warm sun, I told him the news.

'I'm pregnant,' I said. 'If you don't want me, I'll still have this baby on my own, but you can stay with me if you want to.'

He turned to me and sincerely declared, 'I will love you forever and I want to stay with you.'

Almost immediately, we drove directly to the bookstore in Eden and bought a book about natural childbirth. Over the next few months, I studied it diligently, copying the breathing charts and placing them around the walls of our bedroom. I was totally focused in my determination to deliver a healthy child. While I wasn't practicing my breathing exercises, I

worked on the land. James built a little kitchenette off the main room, and I cooked and heated water on a fuel stove every day, splitting kindling and collecting bracken for the firebox.

My favourite place was laying on my night-and-day resting in the northern sun reading my natural childbirth books.

But the easy living in the warmth of summer changed with the coming coolness of the autumn season. Now we had to shop in Bega for warm second hand clothes and stock up on supplies and firewood.



My favourite place

During our shopping we managed to find a big cast-iron cauldron to set up outside on top of a fireplace for washing and for bathing. One day when I was alone having a bath, I saw a strange car pull up around the front. I quickly ducked down in the cauldron to hide. People walked up to the cabin, and I could just make out a few of the words in the discussion they were having. 'Illegal dwellings... No permission... Stopped.'

The smouldering fire under me was slowly heating up the water and my feet started to burn. Panic began to take over. 'What if I get boiled alive!' was the thought going through my mind. I'd have to get out of the bath. But the last thing I wanted to do was jump up naked, looking vulnerable before these people.

They knocked, waiting for a minute. There was quiet, and they knocked again. I crouched until the heat of the water was nearly at boiling point. I had almost given up the fight and was about to jump out when I heard the rustling of paper and the clip clop of high heeled shoes struggling back down the dirt path. The car door slammed and sped off too fast down my little road.

'Oh, my goodness!' I jumped out, with a better understanding of what people experienced who were nearly boiled alive by pirates or cannibals.

I was now 25 years old, and my years of life experience had made me much stronger. Even though James was only two years younger than me, he found that threatening, we had continual small conflicts. James liked to start and end his days with a smoke. I was different; I had started smoking dope again but I didn't smoke cigarettes. One night when we were in bed and about to blow out the candles, he lit up a smoke.

'Please don't smoke in bed?' I asked him, but he didn't reply. He just got up and took some bedding with him to sleep in the kitchenette. I laid there for a while wondering if he was cold or if he hated me now. 'Hey, come back,' I called.

'No,' he said. 'You won't let me smoke in bed.'

I thought about that for a while, with a fear in my heart. I would ruin everything if I didn't give in, I told myself.

'Okay,' I said, defeated. 'You can smoke in bed.' Not long after, without a better guide, I started smoking cigarettes too.

From the beginning, I had seen James as a pure sort of bloke, funny and harmless. It confused me when, one day, he explained, 'I like to take the side of darkness because I can see its point of view. I think evil is not bad.'

I said nothing, but my thoughts were the opposite. 'How can he say that when evil is what I was trying to get away from?' I asked myself.

The heavier I got with my pregnancy the more anxious I became to have things finished around the place before the delivery. I transferred my anxiety to James by way of verbal pressure, when all he wanted to do was take things in his own stride. That meant getting up late, smoking and thinking.

His frustration with my impatience exploded one morning when he laid into the back of my body with his fists. Every punch sent fear and hurt through me. Even though it was only for a few seconds, I had to wait until he stopped. Afterwards, he drove off in anger, staying away all day and night. My back and ribs hurt, and later that night I came out in dark brown bruises from my waist to the top of my shoulders. I knew it was wrong what he did but I thought it would be a one off. After all I had no other example of how a relationship should be.

The next morning, he came back in a brighter mood, stoned, and conveniently not mentioning the bashing. The pain I felt in my back remained for a week. I didn't leave, because I felt like I couldn't. Where else could I go? I thought I had found the safest place in the world here.

Instead, I stayed quiet, keeping guard on my words, in case I upset him again. But, one morning when I woke up, I simply had to tell him something. 'I had a dream last night,' I said. 'It was a dream that this baby is born to love God.'

He immediately jumped out of bed, angry and growling. 'What! How dare you say that about our unborn child,' he said, and he remained angry

for the rest of the day.

The baby got to full-term, and then was late. My birth bag was packed with raspberry leaf tea, honey, calcium tablets, socks, and things for the baby, but still nothing happened. I waited and waited for labour until I was three weeks overdue. One night, we were in bed, James reading his book by candlelight, and I was nearly asleep. That was when we heard the pop! Water went everywhere, but at least this time I was fully educated. I was able to approach the labour with confidence.

I synchronized my breathing with my contractions as we started along the pot-holed road in James' FJ Holden. He rang the hospital from the phone box in the nearest town to let them know we were on our way. It would be about a two-hour drive.

I lay in the back seat with a doona wrapped around me, getting bounced around. The baby became distressed, turning over and over in my tummy and I tried to sing to her to calm her down. When we finally arrived at the car park of the hospital, James went in to let them know we were here.

'Wait here,' he told me.

I continued with my breathing, according to the intensity and timing of the contractions and I was confident in informing the nurse and James, when they came out to the car, that I was in transition. The nurse grunted. 'How would you know that?'

James was ready to carry me in his arms but he was stopped by the nurse who was trying to pull off my warm Ugg boots.

‘Don’t do that!’ I yelled at her. The chilly spring air hit me hard, making my contractions become painful.

‘I will,’ she said. ‘They are too dirty.’

James carried me in, down a corridor and onto a bed with white cold sheets. The room was freezing with no heating. I was sitting up ready for birth when the same nurse came in. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s have a look.’

When she went to examine me, there was the head of our little baby! I pushed a couple of times and she was born, but the cord was wrapped three times under her arms and once around her neck. She was grey and lifeless. The nurse draped her over one arm like a rag doll and with the other hand tried to get the crib going to give her oxygen, attempting to turn it on at the power point with her foot. I watched my baby dangling and screamed hysterically.

‘Give her to me... give her to me!’ I knew I could save her, but the nurse ignored me and ran out of the room. I turned to James. ‘Where has she taken her?’

‘Just wait here and be good,’ he said.

A different nurse came back and explained that she was getting oxygen now. She then went to put a needle into me. ‘What’s that for?’ I asked, pulling back.

‘To make the placenta come out.’

‘No, I don’t need that,’ I told her.

‘If you don’t cooperate with me, I’ll call the ambulance men and they will make you,’ she threatened.

‘No,’ I insisted, ‘it will come out naturally.’

With that she threw the needle in a tray and stormed off. I felt some contractions, gave a few pushes and the placenta was delivered, intact!

After they took it away, I sat up on the bed waiting to see my baby.

I waited until I felt I couldn't wait any longer. I flew off the bed, ran down the hall, toward the cries of a baby.

I searched up and down the hall, but not a nurse was in sight—or any other women or babies. I kept searching until I saw two nurses through glass doors. One of them had my baby hanging upside-down by the feet, while the other was holding a tape measure.

Bursting through the doors into the room I screamed at them. 'Give me my baby!' I dived between them and grabbed my baby's head to lift her up, taking her safely in my arms.

'We have to know her measurements,' one of them tried to say.

I took her back with me. She was pink now and she stopped crying when I held her against my heart.

After I was given a bed and James had left to sleep in the car, the nurses said that babies had to stay in the nursery, but they would bring her to me for feeding.

During the night I could hear the distressed cries of my baby again, so I went down to see what was going on. There I found the two same nurses, one holding a syringe and the other holding my baby tightly, trying to control her. All they had on her, on such a cold night, was a little singlet.

I stood fearless and determined, in front of those two nurses, like a lion willing to kill to protect her cub.

'Give her to me.' I spoke firmly in low threatening tone.

'No,' said the nurse holding her.

Pouncing on them, I tried to take her off the nurse who quickly held on tighter, turning her back to me. I forced myself between them and managed to grab my baby's legs, while the nurse held her torso and arms. Louder and stronger I said, 'Give her to me! She's my baby.'

The nurse pulled her one way and I pulled her my way, until finally they looked at each other and the one holding the syringe said, 'Oh, go on, and give it to her.'

As I took her gently in my arms she tried to explain. 'We were only giving her formula.'

That night I fed my baby from my breast and kept her close to me.

Next morning James came in with the doctor who said I could go home now. 'You are well, and your baby is healthy.' James and I were very happy to get out of there.

On the way home I rang my parents to give them the good news. I got on the phone to Mum first. 'We have a little girl,' I told her.

'Yes, we know,' said Mum. I frowned. How could they have known already? 'When we rang the hospital, they said you caused so much trouble and demanded to leave that they had to let you go.'

I was horrified. 'No, I didn't.'

'Don't tell me that!' said my mum. 'I know what you're like. I feel sorry for the poor nurses and doctor,' she said. 'Here, speak to your brother.'

My brother came on the line, but instead of congratulating me, he said something else entirely. 'What are you trying to do? Kill that baby too?'

I dropped to the floor of the phone box. My brother had just taken out my heart.

James pulled me up, holding me tightly, so that I could howl on his shoulder, and held me until I recovered. My heart had been broken by my family, but James had supported me with compassion that I could feel.

Back at our little isolated cabin, life became entirely consumed by the endless pursuit of supplying our basic living necessities. Getting water, preparing food, getting clothing and building and maintaining shelter made me very tired. I was forever preparing for the next day, and always

had to be on the lookout for goannas, snakes and spiders—for the safety of the baby!

Still, she was a beauty, a happy, smiling, green-eyed baby. I had plenty of milk and she was growing well but as spring changed into a hot dry summer, and winter set the cold on us, I struggled to care for her as well as cope with James's frequent dark moods.

Over and over, he played on his guitar, strumming songs that spoke of depression.

One day, babe in arms, I watched him as he sat outside in the sun on an old chair, his head in his hands.

'How can you say there is nothing to live for when you have a place to live and a brand new, beautiful baby?' I asked, but he ignored me.

Any happiness we had was marred by the difference in the way we wanted to organise our daily routine. I liked to start work early and work all day. He liked to start the morning slow and work in small bursts. This resulted in me becoming frustrated with him, and him getting angry with me.

After a few difficult days he decided to go to Sydney. His mother had offered to pay him to do renovations on her house. My skills in chopping wood, lighting fires, cooking on the fuel stove, washing in the cauldron and being aware of dangers, had improved over time and I knew I'd manage his absence quite well. The only true moment of fear came when I needed a rest one day, and closed up the cabin, making sure there was nothing dangerous in it for a toddler. I fell into a deep sleep but woke up, startled by a loud rustling sound under the floor. I jumped up in a panic that a goanna might have my child but, no, she was playing near the door. But my instincts were still correct. I looked out of the window and saw the biggest lizard I had ever seen!

After three weeks, James came back with a new mattress tied to the roof of the car. He looked very pleased with himself and he was excited about having money to buy things, including a new chainsaw and gun.

Over a cup of tea, he mentioned he had visited an old girlfriend in Sydney. He then put a photo album he had brought back with him on the table. I turned the first page; there she was, fully naked. I blushed.

‘Can you take that photo out?’ I asked.

‘No, it’s my album.’

He looked to be in a real cocky mood and just as I had laid our sleeping baby down, he grabbed me and forced me down on the bed.

‘No,’ I protested. I knew I was ovulating, and I knew I would get pregnant.

‘Yes!’ he said, trying to pull down my pants, pressing my leg aside with his.

‘No! I’ll get pregnant.’ I tried to wiggle away, but he wouldn’t stop. Part of me felt obliged to give in because I thought he needed it from being away for three weeks.

He only took one minute, and I knew I was pregnant.

I missed two periods, so I went into Eden to a doctor for a test.

‘While I’m here, can I ask about some little bumps around my vagina?’ I said. I knew they were there because I had to wee outside or dig a hole to go to the toilet every time and wiping well was part of the process.

‘How do you know they are there? What are you doing touching yourself?’ he said in disgust. ‘Don’t you know that’s a dirty thing to do?’ I was lost for words.

We moved on, and he told me that the tests showed I was pregnant.

‘You will have to stop breastfeeding your baby straight away,’ he said.

My poor little baby girl had to go onto the bottle without a slow weaning. We gave her goats' milk. I couldn't give her formula milk after what had happened to my first child.

Two months into the pregnancy James asked me to marry him.

I wasn't keen. 'I don't believe that a piece of paper will keep two people together.'

But he stomped his feet. 'I want to get married,' he insisted until I agreed.

We made arrangements to get married at the registry office in Eden the same day we did our shopping. We thought it would be a good idea to give ourselves a break and do our washing at the laundromat as well, while we were there. James was angry when his father wouldn't come down for the wedding or give him a wedding present. My parents didn't come either. Mum said a second marriage was not important.

Marriage didn't help James lose his dark moods. These could last for minutes and extend to hours or days. My pleading for work to be done on our cabin were met only with silence. He wouldn't do anything when he was having a dark attack. Eventually, at seven months pregnant, I was the one who dug the hole for our toilet. It was two metres deep and one metre round, with wood arranged over the top to squat on. To get the wood, I had to put our 16-month old toddler on my back in a sling and use the chainsaw. My greatest fear was that the baby might fall into the toilet, so James finally made a lid.

We had been through our second summer, and autumn now was approaching. James got some work in town and I was left on my own all

day. Scratching a living in the wilderness took all our physical and emotional strength. Everything that the land didn't provide we had to bring to it, somehow. My expectations of happiness depended on the beauty around me and the good growing season the weather allowed. I could successfully keep my babies alive, but unfortunately our relationship was failing.

One Saturday, when I was allowed to have the car, I went into town to get some shopping, leaving James at home with our little girl. When I got back and pulled up beside the house, James came over to me and opened the car door. I thought he was helping me. Instead he grabbed my hair and dragged me to the ground.

'Where have you been? Hey?'

I scrambled to my feet and tried to run a little way past the car to escape down the road, but I saw my little girl come outside, so I stopped.

'Come here, bitch!' James said, grabbing my hair and dragging me to the ground again. 'Who have you been with?' he kept repeating.

He dragged me along the gravel on my stomach by my hair. I could feel it ripping out of my skull, as he pulled me to the entrance of the front door, yelling and screaming at me. When he started kicking me, I curled up in a ball trying to protect myself. Suddenly our little girl stood between us. She faced him, her little hands on her hips and her legs apart, in a stance ready to fight him.

'You leave my mummy alone!' she said so bravely in her little baby voice.

James stopped, poised in mid-action, startled for a moment by the defence of a mother by a 16-month-old baby. He left off kicking and beating me and took off in the car. I was safe—for now.

Even though I was only seven months pregnant, I started to feel the beginning of labour contractions. This was not good. Immediately I took myself to a quiet place and practiced breathing to calm myself down and prevent it progressing.

When things had settled down, I leaned against the wall of the cabin. James had gone, but he would come back, and I would never be safe. All my hope was lost. Nothing was left but emptiness, bitterness, hate, and resentment. I didn't have the joy I once had that made me kiss the sky. I closed my eyes. From the deep, deep sadness in my heart, I could just muster a few feeble words, a call for help. But it wasn't English I whispered; it was another language—a language I had never learned. Suddenly I felt a little strength. Suddenly I wasn't afraid. Suddenly I thought, 'I can carry on.'

James came back that night. Again, he acted like nothing had happened. We had dinner, smoked a joint and he played his guitar while I listened to the ABC National Radio.

'Hey, James,' I said.

'What?'

'I have a secret.'

'What?' He turned to me with interest.

'When I talk to God, I talk in another language.'

He threw his guitar down and stood up. 'Well, that proves it then! You *are* mad!'

When my pregnancy reached nine months, it was again time to drive the three hours to hospital. When we arrived, I told them I wanted a natural birth and got the usual reaction of rolling eyes and smirks. James stayed with me during the three-hour labour but kept ducking out to have a smoke. I gave birth easily to a beautiful blue-eyed baby girl.

The hospital cleared out a storeroom for me to stay in but there were no windows and I could hardly move the door because it was so heavy. My new baby screamed for the first 24 hours which nobody came to help me or even pop his or her head in to see if I was all right. Her little hands didn't seem to have any blood circulation for those 24 hours either, so I put her crying down to that. James eventually turned up with our other girl and we packed up and drove back to the farm. I held my older girl on my lap and put the baby in the bassinet that was held by the seatbelt.

Back at home, the pressures of living in one room with a toddler and a newborn and trying to build a home with no money stopped James from doing anything, and our arguments became more frequent and intense.

I didn't see what was coming on one dark and moonless night. The only light in our shack came from the few candles placed in the joists of the walls. Our new-born baby girl was asleep in her bassinet in the corner and our other little girl was sleeping next to her on a small mattress.

It was very late and too many meaningless words had been yelled between us. James' anger had risen to an unreasonable level and he slid across the room towards me, holding a knife.

'I could kill you right now,' he threatened, just two feet away. I paused, powerless between him and our babies. As he moved towards me, I ducked to one side; he followed, and I quickly moved sideways the other way. He followed once again. The shadows of the flickering candles made him look evil, his face twisted with hate. Suddenly he picked up the empty kerosene lamp and threw it. I ducked in time for it to hit the unlined wall. Glass shattered around my little baby's bed.

He froze in the half-light as I bent over the baby and picked the shards of glass from her blanket, getting them away from her head.

‘Look what you did! Look!’ My trembling voice gave way to a stronger, fearless anger. ‘You smashed glass all around our baby!’

He silently withdrew into the shadows and lit another joint.

Chapter Fifteen

James was depressed. We were living in poverty, isolated from society, and there was a severe drought on the farm. It was time to move, he decided, so we packed up and he went to work for his father in Sydney.

We rented a cheap house in Woy Woy through a Real estate agent, one of mum's friends and she gave us a good deal. As well, Mum paid the bond and two weeks rent. James and I agreed to cheat Centrelink and make out that we had separated, so that I could claim the single parent benefit. He lived in Sydney during the week at his mum's place, but I felt so relieved living without him that I convinced myself I really was a single parent.

Besides, I was managing well on my own. My daily life centred completely around caring for my children. I provided food, cleaned and washed to give them a happy life. I saw my parents when they came to visit a couple of times a week. They loved the children so much that they even took out a War Service loan and built a room on their house to accommodate them.

The weekends, when James came back, were not so easy. He was moody, grumpy and angry, especially when he found out I had made

friends with the neighbours or had made friends at playgroups.

One night in the middle of one of his silent episodes, I cradled our six-week-old baby in my arms and followed him into the bedroom. He laid down on the bed and picked up his book to read as I came and stood at the foot of it.

With my emotions bubbling up inside me I blurted, 'Talk to me, please?'

In a sudden movement, he flew off the bed and punched me in the face. It pushed me backwards but I didn't fall. I took the full force of his punch on my cheek because I couldn't put my arms up to protect myself. Then he lay back down on the bed, picked up his book, and continued reading.

It happened so quickly, that I was glued to the spot by the shock. I felt like an idiot. My face was hot and stinging. It was starting to go numb but I didn't drop my baby. Trembling, I went into the lounge room. My other little girl was sitting on the couch, pretending to breastfeed her dolly, holding her top up and pressing it to her chest. I sat next to her, acting normal, hoping that she didn't know what had just happened. Then James came out from the bedroom and stood in the doorway for a bit, before he came and sat down next to me.

I was still in shock, speechless. He said in a matter-of-fact way, 'Every time I do it, I feel less and less, so that I don't feel bad about it.'

I was relieved when he went back to Sydney to work.

Occasionally on weeknights he rang me. I thought it was to ask how the children were, but most of the time, he was only interested in having me do rude things and describe them over the phone. I felt uncomfortable and oddly dirty, but he was my husband, I figured. I didn't know if I should or shouldn't do them. I didn't know what was right or wrong.

The staying force behind my ability to endure his violent, moody and unpredictable nature was the hope in my heart that everything would get better one day. I had a vision for the future: we would gain the prize of building a house and living a beautiful self-sufficient life with healthy children in a clean environment.

We lived in Woy Woy for six months. James had earned enough money for us to go back down to the bush, this time better equipped for survival. He had also secured a loan from his father and was hoping to start a roofing business on the South Coast.

We set off in James' new dual-cab truck, loaded up with a gas stove, potbelly, fencing wire, generator, gas bottles and a gas heater for over the sink, plus a chip heater for the bath. We had used his money and bought as much as we could afford. I didn't handle our money nor did I ever have any of my own to spend. It took all the strength of my mind, body and soul, to care for my children and to keep up with James's mood swings. However, I could see that having the things we needed to make our living more comfortable, plus the exciting adventure of building a farm-let, was tempering James's anger and discontentment.

From the moment we pulled up and stepped out of the car we worked hard to prepare before the winter came. With our babies on the ground beside us we worked together, digging fence holes and straining wire, planting fruit trees, building up vegetable gardens with good soil and washing nappies in the plunger washing machine up the back yard. All the while, we watched to see that the little children were not in danger from tools laying around, snakes or the lit fuel stove. The general roughness of the bush was dangerous as well, with its sharp bracken shoots, falling branches and bull ant nests dotted all over the ground.

James paid for a grader to make a road from the main road up to our house and put a dam in on the south side of the mountain. Because of this, during the drought we were the only settlers to have an ample supply of water. We supplied vegetables to the other families and sold parsley to the shop in town. His roofing business wasn't so successful, however. When he attempted to start, the locals in Eden and Bega wouldn't let him into the market. Whenever he approached a building site the men would all at once down tools and stand in a line against him, preventing him from entering in. He gave up and instead, applied for, and won, a maintenance contract with the Housing Department.

During the week he left before dawn to do the maintenance work in town and didn't get back until after dark. I was never sure what mood he would be in when he got home. All the while he was gone, I ran our little farm. Really, I was working 24 hours a day, for at night I was breastfeeding and all day I was working. We bought a donkey and a milking goat but got rid of the goat when she nearly trampled one of the children.

On the weekends James slowly worked on building a room off the kitchen. Often through the day, I watched him sitting on the unfinished frame, his head in one hand and a cigarette in the other, in contemplation. At these times I couldn't say anything to him. If I spoke, he'd do his block and nothing would end up getting done. We were all sleeping under the kitchen table and the wait was excruciating. After the sun went down, he studied for his Higher School Certificate, trying at the same time to get his Master Builders License.

Life on the farm continued as normal. The other families on the farm fell in and out of feuds and relationship fights, which led to stresses for everyone. There were also many injuries, from axe cuts, burns and just the pure strain of starting on the land from scratch.

One of the men who suffered schizophrenia (for which he treated himself with strong dope) one day chopped up his neighbour's water pipe over a disagreement about who robbed whose dope garden. He came up to our house, spitting and spluttering about how he was justified in using his axe in such a violent manner. His threatening black eyes flashed with anger and fear. Suddenly he stopped, mid cursing, to lean over to me. He whispered in a comradely tone, 'They're watching, you know.'

'Oh?' I said.

He rolled his eyes, drawing closer to my face, his fiery stare penetrating into my brain.

'Who?' I asked. I wondered where I should look.

'The CIA,' he said slowly. 'They're watching. Every. Move. You. Make.'

'Ahh,' I agreed, mostly for my own safety. His bad breath streaming out from the cavity of his missing front teeth made it hard for me to breathe.

With no encouragement from me, his burdened soul turned and left, taking him back down our road and with him the fearsome plagues of his mind that clung mercilessly to him, feeding his madness.

Later that week, as James and I were driving along the farm road, a bullet shot through his window and out of mine. James took it to be an attempt at murder. 'Another man is trying to kill me so he can get you,' he told me.

As well as the strains from within our community, there was stress from the outside world. One morning I was in the veggie garden harvesting peas, with my children playing beside me, I heard voices nearby. I stood up and looked in the direction of my front door to see a well-dressed man and woman coming out of it!

'What are you doing in my house?' I demanded, walking towards them.

'We are—'

‘How dare you go into my home,’ I interrupted.

‘We are—’

‘No! You have no right to just walk in here!’

The man stood stiffly upright to assert himself. ‘We are from the Council and we are checking for illegal buildings on this property.’

‘No!’ I said. ‘You have no right to just walk around my home without asking me. You wouldn’t do this to the Prime Minister’s wife, would you?’

My anger made their self-righteous stance dissolve into fear. They hightailed into their car and sped down the road. I never heard from them again.

With all of these stresses, and after so many arguments, as well as days of James not talking to me, and threats of violence when he did, my soul suffered continual torment. It was a struggle to keep my milk supply up and I did want to breastfeed at least until my girl was 18 months. I was getting more desperate about rescuing myself and the children from a bad life and feeling more threatened. James didn’t want me to have any friends, so I now had no access to a car to go and visit anyone.

Getting punched in the ribs again one sunny morning brought everything to a head. Enough was enough, and I decided to leave.

With only the clothes on my back, twenty bucks and a few apples in a bag, I set off down the road, pushing the girls in the old pram. My ribs hurt and I sobbed as I struggled along, trying to keep the pram from sinking in the soft edges of the dirt road. I kept my ear out for sounds of the occasional farm truck that might come along. I wanted to hear one, but not one with him in it.

When a truck did come by, the schizophrenic guy was driving it. From under a mass of dark wild hair, his black mad eyes looked me over

suspiciously. 'Where ya goin?' he asked, seizing the significance of my packed bag and pram. A look of understanding came over his face.

'Where ya goin' ta go?' he drawled, 'You know there's nowhere for ya. You might as well go back. Wad'r-ya goin ta do? An' ya got nuthin!'

His words took away the last bit of strength out of the only flickering hope I possessed.

'Ya ma'd as well go back,' he said again, and he left me, continuing on his way towards town.

I cried.

I felt like a fool, completely humiliated, a failure and broken. I turned the pram around and struggled back up the road. All fight had left me. When James came home that night, he didn't even know that I had tried to leave.



The heat and dry winds of summer turned the drought-stricken bush into a potential tinderbox. Starving, sick rabbits sat still on the dusty roads, hoping and waiting to be run over and put out of their misery. Other animals came to our farm as refugees from the nearby pine forest plantation's activities, including a whole family of emus. I was working in the veggie garden when, first Daddy emu, then Mummy and then, one by one, seven little baby emu heads appeared over the hill behind me, looking for safety and water.

When the fires started, they burned north, south, east and west of our location. One evening, the crisis had worsened, and the fires were being reported continually on the radio. They were getting closer and closer, and

all through the night I lay on the bed, my senses on full alert and my heart pumping with panic, listening to cinders dropping on our tin roof.

Early in the morning, glowing embers were still falling like rain, becoming thicker and heavier as the minutes ticked on.

I pleaded with James. 'Please drive us into Eden so we can stay in a motel?'

An abrupt 'No' was his answer.

As if he was oblivious to my panic, and the danger we were in, he started getting out the paint things to paint the outside of the house. I couldn't see how painting the house was going to save us, but I remembered something I had heard once, that might give us a chance. I started cutting holes in my good woollen blankets so that I could thread them together with string. The plan was to take the children up into the dam and put the wet blanket over us. I didn't know how I was going to hold the children as well as keep the heavy wet blanket over our heads and stay afloat in a dam filled with snakes, but I had no choice.

Lighted cinders were coming down thicker just as I finished the blankets. I was about to grab the girls when a huge explosion stopped James' painting for a moment. It sounded like a hundred waterfalls.

'What was that?' I asked.

'Probably the pine forest in Bombala,' he answered, at the top of the ladder, calmly continuing painting.

'I'm going up to the dam, *now!*' I yelled out, hoping he would drop the brush and come with me. The little girls didn't know what was going on as I piled the blankets on my back and gathered them up in my arms. It was going to be a tough haul, up the steep hill, to the dam but the urgency brought out what felt like supernatural strength from deep within me, enabling me to carry out what was needed to save us.

Suddenly I stopped. Instead of cinders and smoke, the skies were now showering rain! All the ground was quickly transformed into black mushy ash. The rain saved us, not just from being burnt to death, but from having to get into the dam with the snakes. James continued painting the house until he finished it, at the end of the day¹.

I managed to get through that summer with plenty of hard work and good health. Our food was fresh from the garden and we had working systems in place for heating, washing and watering. We set up grey water disposal and a gas fridge. James was now having more 'good days' than 'bad days' and I was driven by the hope that everything would be good in the end. I thought to myself: 'What could be the one thing in the world that would make a man happy? A son!'

I had been using the Billings Method of contraception for a couple of years. It had worked for me and now I planned to use it to conceive a boy. James was happy to go along with me. So, it was at the precise moment predicted the Billings Method, during the end of my ovulation time, that I conceived. 'This is it,' I thought. 'All will be well.' Even though living so isolated from the conveniences of society was hard, I saw a glimmer of a future where James could be happy all the time, living here.

I was two months pregnant when the twelve-year-old daughter of one of the farm families got burnt to death in a fire from a fuel stove that was badly installed. That same week, James came home late one night from working in Eden.

'I want to leave here,' he told me. 'I want to go to Sydney and become a millionaire.'

¹ We found out later that it was the pine tree plantation in Bombala 80 miles away that we had heard explode.

Chapter Sixteen

He said it again the next morning, standing next to the woodpile, tired, and in his shabby stained work clothes. He spoke with such confidence that I knew I could not change his mind.

‘I want to be a millionaire,’ he told me. ‘So, we have to leave here and work in Sydney.’

He must have been thinking about it for a while for within two days, he had organised a truck and someone to help us pack it, rushing around as if a disaster was coming. We had two vehicles to drive up to Sydney, the truck and James’ ute. He put his best carpentry tools into the ute tray and the children into its back seat, and told his friend to sit in the front seat.

‘You can drive the truck, Lesley.’ It held all the gardening tools, our clothes and some other bits and pieces. I was confused. I had never driven a truck before, though I was confident in driving a manual.

On our final day, a fresh summer morning awoke, alive with birds tweeting, bringing food for their young. An overture of humming bees worked crazily to collect pollen from the tall flowering gums, the yellow blossoms of the black wattles yellow and the white flowers of the tea trees.

Tiny native flowers were dotted through the fine native grasses like little brightly coloured stars, offering the small native bees sweet delights. The air was fresh and clean. I stood outside at sunrise, looking over all the work we had put in to make our place comfortable. I was contented with what we had on our farm.

‘My soul is here,’ I thought.

It took all day to pack, and it was only by the time the sun was setting that we were ready to leave. It would have been a moonlit night but thick dark clouds moved in and blanketed the otherwise, bright starry sky. It was impossible to see anything except the road in front of me, lit up by the dull yellow headlights of the truck and the red taillights of the ute I was following.

The first part of the journey was easy because I knew every pothole, bend and rock along the road to as far as the town. After we passed through Eden and onto the narrow Princes Highway, however, the road twisted and turned unpredictably. I faithfully kept up with the red taillights of the ute but my heart jumped every time I had to turn sharply at 100 km an hour to cross one of the many one-lane bridges that suddenly materialised before me, under the headlights. I was panicked and a very dark feeling came over me. What if James had organised things this way so that I would die crashing the truck and he would have the children? It was a miracle that not one other vehicle or truck came towards me as I crossed those bridges.



James expected us to live in Leichardt, in an old brick house, that his father was using as a shop front for his business, but it had lime dust all through the air because he was sanding the plaster off the walls.

‘We can’t live here!’ I was definite.

‘Where do you want to live?’

‘Show me a map of Sydney.’

He spread a map out before me. I looked for the greenest place on it and pointed to that.

‘There,’ I said.

‘Okay, Lane Cove.’ And he set off to rent us a house.

Lane Cove had a beautiful river and plenty of national park forest but sadly our rental was situated alongside one of the very busy Lane Cove Roads. It was so noisy that we couldn’t hear each other talk when we were sitting in the lounge room.

During the day James worked for his father, and during the night he stayed out until the early hours of the morning. Just before he would come home, often very late, I would be woken by a dreadful feeling coming over me. It was as if something evil had happened. Almost immediately, he would then walk into the house. I wanted to leave him because we were getting unhappier and unhappier and he was mean to me most of the time.

After two months he moved us closer to his work into a nice house in Charliecot Street, Dulwich Hill. We were there for one month when the water pipes burst under the house. My three-year old’s room went mouldy overnight and a few days after that she was diagnosed with asthma.

He then rented a house just up the street. We only had to carry our household items a few doors down. He continued to work, and my tummy grew with our third child.

My oldest, who was now four and a half, attended school and I took the younger one to a playgroup a couple of times a week. All the women at the playgroups were from different ethnic backgrounds, but we all worked together to make the morning a good experience for our children. I really

enjoyed being with them, even though no one could understand each other. Our communication was done by gestures and body language.

I enrolled the girls into ballet lessons for Saturday morning. I wanted them to have opportunities in life and I was very excited. When we were all dressed, ready to go to the first lesson, we went into the lounge room where James was watching television. I stood the girls in front of him. They looked so cute.

James was in his usual grumpy mood. 'Where are you going?' he growled

'I told you that I booked the girls into ballet lessons,' I said.

'No! They're not going.'

'What! But, why?' I feebly asked.

'Because I said!'

I took them back into the bedroom with a heavy heart, sadly undressed them and wondered what was I going to do.

The friendly lady who lived across the road had a little girl and a one-legged husband who used to be a bikie. She invited me to her church one day. I wasn't sure how James would react when I told him. 'The lady across the road asked me to go to church with her.' He was grumpy, but he didn't stop me going, and the next Sunday I sat next to her up the back of the church. It was full of people waving their hands and saying lots of strange things and I didn't understand a thing. That night in bed I was whispering the Lord's Prayer when James turned over to me.

'What are you doing?' he snapped.

I stopped, too afraid to pray again, in case he heard me.

That week, while James was at work my new friend came over for a cup of tea. After some chit-chat while we sat at the table together, she turned to

me. 'You know, you can pray for anything. If you ask God in the name of Jesus, you will get it.'

She went on to explain a little more. 'You can ask Him to help you with your marriage and to help you look after your children. God is really practical, and He understands what we need.' Then she asked, 'Can I pray for you now?'

'Yes,' I said out loud, but I really thought, 'Nothing weird anybody does surprises me. Go ahead.'

She simply closed her eyes and prayed. 'Father, bless Lesley and her children. Guide her, bless her marriage and provide for her. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.'

When she left, I felt strangely comforted but too afraid of James to tell him about her.

A few days later an old friend turned up at my door. I knew her from the Paddington days. She had been a heroin addict since that time and lived mostly on the streets. In her youth she had been a sweet, caring girl but the 'Make Love and Not War' slogan that was used by the guys of that generation to manipulate young girls had robbed her of that sweet identity.

'I'll show you that your man is just like the rest of them,' she said, as she stretched her skinny body out on my couch like a cat.

I made dinner, and she ate with me, while James had his in the lounge room. Later, I left her asleep on the couch and James and I went to bed. In the middle of the night I woke up to the voices of her and James talking in my ear. I jumped up, flicked on the light and there was my friend—in my room, naked, and on top of my husband. He was going with the flow. She quickly got off him, looking at me with an *I told you so* smile on her face. Anger raged in me like a wildfire and I pounded James with my fists. 'You

cheat! Liar! Rat!' I yelled at him over and over until he slithered away, grabbing his clothes and escaping out of the house.

I was glad to see my pitiful, twisted friend leave the next morning. The bad feelings that I had about James being away from the family so often were brought into focus and made a reality because of her. I felt I was becoming dirty, as if my house and family were polluted. Everything was wrong. I was ashamed to look at my children. I felt we were open to a sinister danger.

James came back that afternoon and we acted as if nothing had happened. When the phone rang, I answered it and spoke to a friend of ours that we knew from down the bush. He was now living in the Blue Mountains with his wife and two children. They were some of my only friends.

'Put James on,' he said, so I handed the phone over.

After the phone call I asked James what he wanted.

'He said never to come near his wife again or he will kill me'

'What! Why?' I asked in horror.

'I went up to see his wife. I thought she liked me and wanted to have sex with me.'

I couldn't believe my ears. I was in shock that James would do that, and my heart was broken that now I had lost my friends.

I was seven months pregnant by this time, and once again hoping to have a natural birth, but the hospital had other ideas.

'You can't do that unless you go to ante-natal classes,' they told me. So, I turned up one morning to a room where 35 pregnant women were lying around in a circle on the floor. The ante-natal trainer had the body of a sumo wrestler and gave her instructions like a sergeant in an army camp.

She marched around the circle commanding, 'Up, down, up, down, up, down.'

Women groaned under the weight of their bulging tummies but lifted themselves up and down in time to her quick march beat.

'Now.' She announced it with victory. 'I'll show you where your muscles join in the centre.'

With determination, and a sharp, well-aimed finger, one by one, she pressed each woman's tummy until she came to me.

Pop! The hard pressing of her finger put a hole in my waters. When I saw the midwives for it, I was advised to stay in bed for two months, until the hole mended.

It was hard having to lie in bed all day. We had to find a Home Care family, through the Council, who would mind our girls after school each day. When they came home, I still had to look after them, which was almost impossible from my bed. One afternoon I was woken out of my pregnant slumber by the sound of naughty giggles from down in the kitchen. I headed down there as fast as I could, fearing my children were in danger, only to find them happy throwing tomato sauce all over the kitchen walls and ceiling.

James' anger and violent behaviour blurred my mind from every direction. I knew he scared the baby as well. When he came home from work one day and spoke, my baby jumped in my womb.

Even though I was afraid of him, I also didn't want to be left alone. One night when he told me he was leaving, I went into a hysterical panic and got on my hands and knees in the hallway begging, 'Please don't leave me, please, please don't.'

He tried to get out the door, but I held onto his bag. 'Please don't go,' I sobbed over and over. The more he tried to go the more I cried and begged

on the floor.

Eventually he said, 'Ah, what's the use,' and left the bag behind. He went out for a few hours, instead.

On the Saturday morning that I was eight days overdue, I suddenly had an overwhelming need to go to a park and be with trees and grass and fresh air. It was a beautiful sunny day, and James reluctantly agreed to take me. After a couple of hours, just as I was feeling relaxed, I felt a strong contraction.

I called to James who was playing with the girls. 'I think this is it.'

He quickly bundled us into the car and started driving to Paddington Women's Hospital, but then suddenly made a detour. 'I have to drop something off at dad's work,' he said. 'Come in and leave the girls in the car.'

I went in with him and watched him fiddle with some papers in the desk. My contractions were coming closer now and were getting more and more intense.

'Bend over,' he told me.

I frowned. 'No.'

He forced me down, lifted my dress and tried to penetrate me.

Unimaginable pain shot through all my body. It felt like a knife was cutting my birth canal.

'No, stop!' I screamed. I felt like I would die if he didn't stop.

'Oh, alright.' Quite put out, he withdrew and immediately went to the car.

I sat in the front seat while we drove on to the hospital, leaning over facing the girls and panting, ready for transition stage. The girls were copying me. When we stopped, I jumped out of the car onto all fours and had a massive contraction.

James waited for it to stop. 'We have to go up those flights of stairs to the natural birthing rooms,' he said. 'Can you make it?'

I surveyed the distance and the number of stairs. 'Yes,' I said. I waited for the contraction to stop, and then sprinted across the lawn. I got up the flight of stairs, and through the door of a dark room, where I jumped on a bed. Directly out of the window I could see a big, white full moon. The lights went on and a nurse appeared.

'You have to turn over and have monitors put on you,' she told me. 'Your waters have broken and there's meconium in them; the baby is distressed.' She hurried off to get the equipment, but I stayed on all fours. My baby and I communicated that we would push him out *now*! I knew he would die if we waited for the nurse.

I pushed, and James gallantly held out his hand to catch any faeces so that it wouldn't get on the baby as he came out. I heard what was like the sound of ripping rags, but it was my pelvic floor muscles. I felt my baby's mind leave mine. Then I heard a cry and turned around to see a little boy that looked like a frog, curled up on the bed. James had gone to wash his hands and the nurse was not there so I picked the baby up and he fed immediately, emptying both breasts.



Having a son didn't make James any happier. Instead, he seemed to get grumpier. He was angry when he found out that my mum had come down on the train and opened a bank account for me. He was still violent, too. One afternoon the husband of a friend from the farm, now living in Sydney, rang up to speak to James while he was out at work. When James came home, I was sitting in the kitchen at the table, breastfeeding my son.

‘Ken rang and wanted to talk to you,’ I told him. ‘He asked you to ring him back.’

Without any warning, James punched me in the face. The baby let out a gurgling scream.

‘You got turned on by hearing his voice, didn’t you?’ James said, standing over me.

I couldn’t speak. My nose hurt and my baby was inconsolable, crying in my arms.

When I went to the doctor to get my nose treated, she told me it wasn’t broken. ‘But you should go to the police. He should be charged,’ she said.

‘I can’t, I just can’t,’ I said. But I felt as if I was letting down not only myself, but her as well.

Our son was four months old when James decided to get his eyes lasered so that he didn’t have to wear glasses. At the same time, I had to have a revision of an episiotomy operation, because my bowels were falling out of my birth canal.

My operation was done in a private hospital by a female surgeon. I fed my baby and went in for the op. As I was coming out of the anaesthetic, I saw James standing beside my bed.

‘Did I have a curette?’ I asked

‘No, why?’ James said, looking concerned.

‘I’m bleeding.’

Quickly he ran off and within a minute came back with a nurse. When she lifted the sheet over my body, blood spurted from me to the wall. A few seconds later, I was whisked down the hall on my bed and back into the operating theatre. Later, in recovery ward the surgeon told me he’d had to undo the external and internal stitches. ‘I forgot to sew up a major artery. I found rotting muscle hanging and had to carefully cut it out.’

When I went home, I had to stay in bed for the stitches to heal while James was recovering on the lounge from his eye operation. He said he could not have bright lights for a while.

I started to feel there was something wrong in my body and felt really sick all over. 'I don't feel well,' I called out to James from the bedroom. 'I want to go to the doctor.' But he didn't want to take me.

After two days, I couldn't walk at all. I crawled my way up the carpeted hallway to where I could see him sitting on the couch watching television. 'James, call the doctor,' I demanded from the floor. 'There is something wrong with me.'

When he saw it was really serious, he called the doctor who put me straight back into the hospital. A large blood clot had formed in the stitches and I had to sit in a salt bath for a week until the clot went down. James brought my son in for his feeds. I had abdominal pain continually after this.

When I went for a check-up after six weeks the doctor said I had atypical cells on my cervix caused by smoking (I smoked about 40 rollies a day) he gave me diathermy.

We moved again to Canterbury, opposite Canterbury Public School where my five-year old started school. Here, James's behaviour became even more torturous and strange. One night when I was stirring a pot of stew in the kitchen, suddenly he scaled the second story wall and jumped through the kitchen window, whereupon he ran through the flat to the telephone near the front door and pressed the redial button.

'I'm checking to see who you just called,' he said.

I carried on as if I didn't notice anything, because I hadn't called anyone.

He started staying in the bathroom for an hour at a time, not letting me use it even if I really needed to. Afterwards, he would come out all spruced up and go out all night. He gave me enough money to get food, but he paid the bills. I never knew how much money he had. It was enough to buy himself Buddha sticks and not share with me, though. One time I accidentally washed his dope with his work pants.

‘Have you seen my dope?’ he growled.

‘No.’

When he found it in his pocket, all washed out, he was furious.

After the children were in bed one night, and we were sitting on the lounge, James told me that he had been to a prostitute. ‘All she did was watch TV when she was having sex with me,’ he said, sulking a little.’

‘He wants me to feel sorry for him,’ I thought, but I was so shocked I couldn’t think of anything to say.

He went on talking to me as if he thought I would feel pity for him, ‘All the young guys at work are going out with different women and having fun.’

I was disappointed that he would think this way, and I didn’t understand his unfaithfulness. All I had done for seven years was put my head down to the task of having James’ babies and looking after them. Breast feeding and surviving was my priority. I never thought of being unfaithful. I never thought our marriage would turn out like this. I started drinking at night and stealing his dope butts and becoming more and more depressed.

There was more loss. I found out through someone who went down to our farm, that all our trees and fencing had been stolen. The thieves even took our household appliances including my fuel and gas stoves and chip

heater. Everything was gone. The news shut the door for me on any hope I had of ever having the life I loved so much.

Then came the night that changed everything.

I had put the children to bed and cleared the table, ready to put out the dinner plates. James came home and threw our bankbook down on the clean tablecloth. He then sat down in the lounge room and popped a can of beer.

I opened the bankbook. Why had he thrown it on the table? Had something happened? I opened it and ran my finger down the side where the balances were listed. The last entry in the book read \$0.00.

There was no money in the account.

I felt sick.

I walked up the hallway and stood in the doorway to the lounge room. 'Where is all the money?' I asked him.

'In my cheque book.' He stared straight ahead at the TV.

Every terrible feeling, I had ever had rolled over me. Bitterness, resentment, humiliation, powerlessness. I felt degraded, belittled, overwhelmed.

I walked back to the kitchen, took out a beer from the fridge, and sat at the cleared table, drinking it as fast as I could.

Then I ventured back to the doorway. 'Why?'

'Because I wanted to.' He was sitting comfortably, sipping slowly on his third can.

By now I was slightly drunk because I hadn't eaten all day. Not knowing what else to do, I rang a cab and took it to his mother's place a couple of

suburbs away. When I got there, she paid the fare.

James' mother was a kind woman. She had taught Ancient Greek, had five children and was now divorced. She often combed the second-hand shops, finding useful things for my children.

I sat sobbing in her cluttered kitchen, the old newspapers and books spread over all the tabletops, chairs and benches.

'James went to a prostitute,' I lamented. 'And he's been violent to me.'

She listened in silence behind her newspaper, and after a few minutes suddenly left the room. I heard her talking in low tones on the phone. When she returned, she said in a matter-of-fact way, 'James wants to leave you. Take my car, drive back home and wait in the car until he leaves.'

I felt a hole form in my heart when she told me the plan. *James wanted to leave me?* But I did exactly as she said and waited in her car outside our unit. I hid, low in the seat until he had left, because I was afraid of him. After he was gone, I went inside and waited, expecting him to come back.

The next morning, he still hadn't come back. I did the usual routine of giving the kids breakfast, feeding the baby and getting ready for school. But as the morning wore on, I felt oddly strange.

I rang the local hospital. 'My husband's left me, and I don't know what to do,' I said feebly.

Within an hour a nurse came to my unit. After she checked over the children she said, 'You're in shock. I'm going to send a social worker and a lady to come each night and help you cook dinner. Also, I am booking you into a playgroup for disadvantaged families. They have a bus that can pick you up.'

For the next three weeks, every night a lovely old-fashioned Italian lady came around and made dinner for us. She spoke kindly to me and tried to teach me some mothering and housekeeping skills that I respected.

When James' father found out that he had left, he rang me. 'Congratulations,' he said. 'We are glad James has left you. You are better off without him.' His mother, however, decided not to speak to me anymore.

I got an eviction notice from the Department of Housing. They had bought the building; it would be demolished to build new Public Housing. I left the open letter on the table and the Social Worker happened to read it when she came to visit.

'First, we have to get you on benefits,' she said. 'After that, we will write a letter to the Department and ask them to extend the eviction notice.'

Every night after I had put the children to sleep, I went to my bedroom and got down on my knees. I remembered what that old neighbour had told me about praying, so, very carefully I did it in the order she said. 'Our Father which art in Heaven,' I began, going all the way through the Lord's Prayer. Then I tacked a bit extra on the end. 'Please, I ask God in the name of Jesus if I can have a house, outside of the city, big enough for a chook pen and a vegetable garden and some fruit trees, where I can live permanently?'

I prayed and cried myself to sleep every night for three weeks—until one night, as I was sobbing into my pillow, I had an extraordinary experience.

With my mind's eye, I saw a light begin to appear in the centre of the room. It was about the size and shape of a man, and it moved slowly until it was beside my bed. Then I heard a voice say, 'Do not fear. I will never forsake thee nor leave thee.' At the sound of these words comfort passed through my soul. The need to cry left me.

During one of these difficult days there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find a very elderly man standing there.

‘Would you let me read the Bible to you?’ he asked. I felt sorry for him because he was so old, and invited him in. When he was standing in the lounge room, he said, ‘I’m blind would you read the Scriptures to me?’

He said he was a Jehovah Witness. I didn’t understand what I was reading but at the same time I knew I didn’t agree with him.

The small playgroup bus picked us up one morning with other mothers and their children already on the bus, and took us to a playgroup room at the council building. I sat on the floor, amongst the little children watching how they interacted with each other and their mums. I could see they all had been affected by trauma by the way they fought over nothing, cried about anything and did naughty things to get any attention. My eyes were opened to the fact that others in our society were also in dire straits. I felt I was living in no-mans-land under a dark cloud. It took me three weeks of not seeing or hearing from James to realise that our family unit was broken and truly finished. Even then, I didn’t know it until he walked in the door with a young, scantily-dressed girl.

He strutted around, showing off his catch with an *I won* smile on his face. The girl stood next to me in a dream-like state. She was obviously mesmerized by him.

Waving his arm around the room, he asked me, ‘What do you want?’

‘Everything,’ I said. ‘You can keep the TV.’

I hated that TV. He used it as a weapon, sitting and watching it to ignore me. The rest of what we had was what the children needed anyway. He took the TV and left, the girl silently falling in behind him.

I still faced the problem of having nowhere to live, and the social worker couldn’t get me into the women’s refuge in Sydney. They said I was not from domestic violence; I was only a single parent being evicted.

Fortunately, when my sister-in-law found we were going to be homeless she contacted some women she knew who ran a refuge up the Coast. After meeting with them she secured a crisis house for me at Kariong that was being renovated. The refuge managed the property but it was too far away for them to maintain. I had to wait until it was ready for us.

I took my children on the train up to my parents after Mum tossed her head and told me, 'The children can stay for one weekend but you can't live here. I just couldn't cope.'

While travelling back I met a friendly bloke on the train called Roger, just a bit younger than me. He found out that I was going to be homeless with my children and gave me his address, offering me a room in his house. I had to wait somewhere until the crisis house in Kariong was ready so I accepted his offer.

Roger helped me pick up a few clothes and took me back to the old two-story terrace house in Newtown that he shared with other people; apparently, they all worked in the Australian Tax office. After he showed me my room down stairs he offered me a beer. I didn't really like beer but I drank it. It was Saturday night and the house was full of young office workers, drinking and listening to loud music. I joined in, drinking too much, dancing hysterically and generally acting out of control. Later, I went upstairs and got into bed with Roger. I thought having sex with him would be the natural course of things, and I made some effort but he didn't respond.

'There is something I want to tell you,' he said, laying straight in the bed.

'What?'

'I'm not really... I don't. I can't, I don't feel...' He left off talking and went to sleep. I quietly went to my room.

Over the following weeks I got drunk on the weekends that James had the children and I hung out with Roger and his sad friend, Tim. Tim's mother had just died, and he carried her ashes in his pocket everywhere. I thought I had to have sex with Tim, but he wasn't interested either. We became a threesome of depressed, drinking mates.

I struggled to keep a sensible mind, living in one little room with three children, and having no money, in a house with other damaged people. I began to feel I was unworthy to have children and thought about giving my children up to the Welfare. After six weeks I hadn't heard from the women's refuge and I started to feel that I was a danger to the children.

My father-in-law, Thomas, turned up at the house and told me he wanted to buy me a car, so off we went to check out a private sale. Sitting in the young seller's lounge room, Thomas haggled with her, bringing tears streaming down her checks. Thomas, a businessman, was merciless and uncompromising on the price he was willing to pay. (When James was a boy Thomas used to come home from the pub late at night and punch him until he hit the wall.)

'It was our family's farm car,' the young woman explained between sobs. 'They gave it to me for a present; I don't want to sell it but I need money to continue my studies. I feel I should sell it for a good price.'

Thomas got the car for the lowest price and I felt so sorry for the young girl.

As soon as I had my 1967 240c Datsun, I took no time in driving up the coast to find out what was holding up my housing. When I pulled up at the property, on a busy main road at Kariong, I marched up the path to the front door where a man was working inside.

I threw my question at him without introducing myself. 'Why isn't my house ready? I'm living in one small room with three children and I've

been waiting for six weeks for this.'

A few expressions passed over the man's face, from anger through to compassion. He put his tools down. 'Come in and I'll show you around,' he said in a gentle voice. 'There is new carpet in the lounge room and all three bedrooms. I have put new tiles in the laundry and a new kitchen and stove. The whole place has been painted. I just have to finish off a few things and it's nearly ready.'

His gentle manner calmed my wrath. With two sets of double French doors and light filling up every room, I couldn't believe this house was going to be mine. It used to be the old post office but now it had been made brand new. I drove back to Sydney, relieved. There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Chapter Seventeen

As soon as I was given the keys to the house, I took off with my children away from the city up to our new life. It didn't take much to move in because we didn't have anything. I bought a small fridge, three foam mattresses and a cot for the baby from Vinnies. James came up occasionally with his girlfriend and took the children out. He always rubbed in his victory over me by his smug grin as he was leaving with them.

One Sunday morning I thought I would take the children down to a church. While were standing in the congregation, we were all told to say 'hello' to each other. When I turned to either side the people turned away from me and talked to their friends. The time came for going down the front to take the cup and bread but I nearly keeled over from the strength of the alcohol. I decided not to go there again.

Depression started to set in fast and thick. I started drinking a lot of Dad's home brew and doing things without thinking of the consequences. I liked working on my car, but I was drinking so much that I always seemed to make any mechanical problem it had worse. One day I took the door off

and drove to the mechanic around the corner for help. He was very patient putting the door back on for me. As he did, we started talking about God.

‘This world is coming to an end, you know,’ he said.

‘No, it’s not!’ I answered aggressively. ‘Why would God end everything when he made such beautiful things as babies and all the beautiful earth?’

My drinking became my block against the reality of my situation. The worse I became in my behaviour, the more I was aware of my separation from God.

Hopes of my children ever having any happiness or of me having any ability to give them a good life sank me into the mud of despair. My body began to deteriorate, starting with numbness in my fingers and toes. I couldn’t hold a conversation without forgetting what I was talking about in the middle of a sentence. I was on a downhill slide, but I couldn’t help myself.

When I got a job doing ironing at home, the lady said I couldn’t do it anymore. All the clothes smelt like cigarettes and she couldn’t have that.

I started ringing James at night begging him to come back but he wouldn’t. He did come up a few times, just to harass for sex, but when I resisted, he held back maintenance.

I rang Lifeline and told them I wanted to be near God, but they said they weren’t allowed to talk to me about Him.

About five months later, around midnight, I was quite drunk, when I decided to smash myself up in my car. If I couldn’t get back to God I didn’t want to live so I started up a road that went to Wisemans Ferry and put my foot down hard on the accelerator expecting to hit a rock or take a bend badly or something, but it didn’t happen because the road I was on went straight for miles and miles. I drove for so long that eventually I started

considering, “What would happen to the children if I died?” I turned the car around and drove home not realising I had wrecked the gearbox.

When I got back, I sat on the kitchen floor, beaten like a soldier who had lost the war. I had drunk and smoked everything in the house in order to run away from my situation. There was nothing for me in this life. I couldn't get back to God because I had too much sin. I opened my mouth to say, ‘God... help,’ but instead, I spoke a whole sentence in another language. It sounded like French! Instantly I was dead sober. I didn't know I knew any French. ‘Perhaps I can speak French because my soul is French,’ I thought. I remembered that Dad had said his father was French.

I had to take the car around to the mechanic the next day to get the gearbox fixed. As he was looking under the bonnet he said, ‘My wife asked if you would like to go to a coffee morning tomorrow?’

‘Yep...sure,’ I said. He wrote down my address and the following morning a car pulled up to my front door. A very strong, determined-looking woman got out. ‘Hi, I'm Joy,’ she said with a big smile. ‘So, you're coming to the coffee morning with me now?’

I was ready to go but she gave me the feeling that I would be going even if I didn't want to.

We drove to a small house not far away, and when we walked in, I took a seat alongside several other women. They were all watching something showing on a movie projector.

A tall, blond woman sitting next to me turned to me. ‘I was an alcoholic and I've been healed.’

This didn't mean much to me. Alcohol was my answer, not my problem. Instead I listened the man showing the movie, who started talking. He said it was a prophecy movie about someone called Daniel. We were living in the last days, he explained, and these were the signs. I wasn't

interested in the movie because I had seen enough trouble and I didn't want to see or hear any more bad news. I ignored it, but when it finished the man swung around in his seat and asked me if I wanted to have some prayer.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Sure.'

He and Joy took me up the stairs into one of the bedrooms. I was nervous. They stood each side of me. 'Just say "praise the Lord", Lesley,' the man said, and put his hand on my shoulder. I tensed myself and went to pull away, as I didn't trust men, but when he touched me, I knew straight away that he was holy. I opened my mouth to repeat the words he told me to say, but to my surprise, other words came out. They were the same ones I had spoken a week ago.

'Oh,' he said, speaking to Joy. 'She's received!'

They immediately left off praying with me and went back down the stairs, with me following behind. 'What are they talking about?' I wondered. I was given a cup of tea and cake. I noticed all the women seemed to be really happy about something. They also seemed to get along really well.

The following Sunday, Joy turned up to my place to take me to her church. I wasn't ready. Even though she'd invited me, I actually didn't think she would come, but she burst into my front door and into the kitchen.

'Before I got into her car, she opened her Bible and said, 'Here, read this in Mark chapter 16:16.'

When I read those words that Jesus said, "*He that is baptized shall be saved,*" I saw that same shape of light I had seen the night I was crying in my bed, six months ago. That figure was now standing beside me again, holding my hand saying, '*This is what I want you to do.*'

I hadn't known I could be baptized. I thought that once you were an adult it was too late. But I wanted to be saved and close to God. I wanted to save my children. It was the one thing I wanted most in the world.

I got into the car with my children and hers and we drove to a farming area where, she said, their church owned a property on which they had built a hall out of mud bricks. As we approached, I could see that it didn't look like a church at all but it looked more like a Mudbrick home. Children were running and playing together and the adults weren't dressed in crisp white dresses, gloves and handbags, but ordinary clothes. She took all the children into the Sunday school waving her hand pointing me to go on into the meeting. I walked into the crowd not knowing a soul but I wasn't afraid.

The hall had mustard coloured painted mudbricks up to the roof which itself was supported by huge poles the size and thickness of trees taken from a forest. It was completely full of people listening in silent interest, to a man speaking on a stage at the front. As I listened to him talk about God, I was totally surprised. He seemed to know the same God that I did—a living God who created the universe, a God of love; not a God that lived somewhere else waiting to judge harshly everything I did.

'Let's open the meeting in a word of prayer,' the man said at the beginning. I closed my eyes and started saying, out loud, 'Our father which art in heaven.' I stopped when I realised everyone else was saying 'Hallelujah' or 'Praise to the Lord'. I felt comfortable that no one judged me.

As we were coming to the end of the meeting Joy asked me, 'do you want to get baptized?' I did but I had my periods and I was too embarrassed to tell her that.

'No, not today,' I said.

During the week, I visited my parents and mentioned to Dad. 'I want to get baptized.'

In his usual dry voice, he answered, 'What do you want to get baptized for? You were when you were a baby.'

'But I didn't know what I was doing then, Dad,' I said.

The closer Sunday drew, I was plagued with a volcano of emotions which kept me in a state of doubt. I was not convinced that any person or groups could be true. My trust in people was taken from me long ago and my life experiences proved to me that truth was not in Mankind. When I did trust someone, I was only led up the garden path to my own hurt. At the same time, I was really sorry for all the things I had done wrong in my life.

Sunday morning Joy pulled up in her "people mover" and walked straight into my house. I had a couple of empty beer bottles and two full ones on the bench. She grabbed them and started pouring them down the sink and the same time telling me, 'You don't know what's good for you.' Then she turned around and grabbed my children and shuffled them into her car with me scrambling to grab my bag and get into the Van with them.

When we arrived, she took my children into the Sunday school again and my baby into the crèche, leaving me to walk in by myself. I was more familiar with the way they opened in prayer this time and I was relaxed. I wanted God so much; I wanted to be "right" with Him. When the meeting was ending, Joy turned to me again and asked, 'well, do you want to be baptised?'

It felt so good to say, 'Yes, I do'

She led up to a change room and gave me a pair of swimming costumes and a white gown to change into. The stage had big heavy curtains behind which was a tank about the shape and size of a coffin filled with warm

water. As I sat in it, I could hear all the people singing and clapping on the other side. A man knelt beside the tank and explained to me that in order for him to baptise me he was going to ask me three questions. 'Is that alright?' he asked.

'Yes' I was relieved that I was finally doing what God wanted.

A small curtain opened exposing my face and his to the people. He placed his hand on my head and began to ask me.

'Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Do you believe that he died to give you a new way of life?'

'Yes,' I said again.

'I now baptize you in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost.'

I held my nose and went backwards under the water. I didn't come up straight away because I thought I had to stay under longer. I thought I had to stay under the water for a long time because I have been a bad person and was prepared to do this when but he pulled me up immediately and started speaking in a strange language over me.

This startled me; I was suddenly affrighted. 'Oh, no...what have I gotten myself into this time?' I thought. A few minutes later, as he was finished, he said something to me about how I should now receive something from God now that I was baptised. I wasn't quite sure what he meant.

That night I stayed sober for the first time since I moving into this house while putting my children to bed. When everything was done and the children were asleep, I got on my knees next to my bed, and tried to pray.

I remembered what the man had said that if I said, 'Hallelujah,' I could expect something to happen.

I tried to say 'Hallelujah,' but I found it strange a word because it wasn't Australian. Besides, I felt like I was just talking to a wall.

After a few minutes I thought, 'I wonder if it's this other language that I talk to God in, that they are talking about?' I decided I would try to speak those words on purpose. (The other times, the words had been driven out of my heart from desperation.)

I went to try one sound, when, to my surprise, sentence after sentence started flowing, welling up from deep within me, bringing up deposits of deep pain. As I spoke this beautiful language, the deepest pain I had—the death of my baby—was healed by the power of this fountain.

It was extraordinary. I was saturated in tears, light, joy, healing and love kneeling on my bedroom floor. I knew I was completely healed of the need to put myself 'out of it'. In fact, the need to drink, smoke dope and end my life, completely left me. Without realising it for a while, swearing had even gone from my vocabulary. Confident that now that God had accepted me; I felt overwhelmed with hope for living.

Late that night I remembered, with fear, that James was coming up this Friday night. He was afraid of public transport and I thought that if he didn't have a car he wouldn't come. So, I decided to pray about it.

'Please, God, in Jesus name, stop James from coming up,' I asked. 'Smash his car up!' I thought about that for a moment, and worried that it wasn't very nice, so I added on, 'But don't let him get hurt.'

The next morning, I awoke, still filled with the amazing revelations from the previous evening of what I had received. After driving the children to school I dropped into my parents' house nearby bursting to tell them of my healing. As I came through the gate Dad was doing some gardening on his knees. He watched me walk up the path towards him and then, staying on his knees, he said something he had never said before.

‘I’m sorry for what I did to you when you were a little girl.’

I was stunned. ‘I forgive you, Dad,’ I told him. ‘But you need to get baptized too.’ I wanted everyone to experience what I had experienced.

‘I’ve been baptized,’ he told me. ‘In the River Jordan, during the war. A lot of us did.’



I got a phone call from James on Friday night, when he was supposed to be coming up to see the children. He was in an accident, he told me. He had wrapped his car around a telegraph pole, outside a 24-hour medical centre. They took him out of the car and gave him a cup of tea. He did not have a scratch on him, but his car was a write-off.



In the weeks following my baptism, the new church took wonderful care of my little family. The ladies in the church went through their wardrobes and gave me many beautiful dresses, as well as clothes and toys for the children. When they saw that we didn’t have any beds, they gave us new beds each. When I found out that all the people in the church could speak in tongues, I decided I had found people just like me, and I was so happy to go with them on Sundays.

Because I felt close to God now, I had hope for my children and myself. In fact, I was healed from hopelessness. I had three wonderful weeks of joy and peace—until James came up on another Friday night. He had gotten himself another car. But I was ready for him. When he walked into the

kitchen looking all smug as usual, the first thing I did was show my new Bible to him. I opened it to the book of Mark, and the words of Jesus.

‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; (Mark 16:15-20, KJV)

I particularly pointed to the part about speaking in tongues.

‘See?’ I told him. ‘I’m not mad after all.’

I watched the colour in his face drain away; he had no answer.

Later that night he demanded sex with me, but I had a new confidence and I said no. He stomped his feet and started to throw a tantrum again but I was not going to let anything, or anyone take my new life away from me. He gave up being intimidating and I grew in peace, love and joy.

Things were changing in all my relationships. My mother rang me late one night and said, ‘I realise I neglected you when you were a child. I’m sorry.’ I took what she said seriously and believed her because she had never said anything like that to me ever before.

That year in 1987 I went to my first Christmas camp with the church. I had a cabin and enjoyed meeting people of all ages. Every night after the items and talks a log cabin was used for prayer. I was on my knees one night, and put my hand up for prayer, so a young man came over to me.

‘What do you want to pray for?’ he asked.

‘I have arthritis in my hands,’ I told him. ‘I can’t hold a pencil to draw with my children,’ I said.

He put his hand on my head and started praying. I felt stiffness and pain leave my hands, arms and spine, as if a vacuum cleaner had sucked it out of me.

The next healing was shortly after, when I was in the shower. I was still suffering from the abdominal pain that I had had for a while, and I was thinking about what I heard in one of the talks about praying for healing. I asked, 'Jesus, please heal me,' and the pain went away instantly and completely.

Another time, I had to go the gynaecologist for a pap smear. He found cells that were about to turn to cancer again, so he booked me in for another procedure of diathermy. Prior to that appointment the church was having a prayer and fast. I was sitting in my seat praying for healing when I felt a warm light beam through the top of my head and pass down through the centre of my body to my cervix. I knew instantly that I was healed.

When I turned up to my appointment, I told the specialist that I felt in my body that I was healed, and I didn't need the procedure.

'Alright,' he said. 'I'll do a test.' The test results showed that I was completely clear of cancer cells.



It is now over 30 years since I was baptized and all the mud of my sins washed away from my soul. The prophecy of my memory came true; I had to learn to love God and I do through Jesus, with all my heart, mind and strength. I could fill a book with testimonies of all the wonders God has done in my life, and the amazing way He has made peace for me on every side. Through His forgiveness for me I have truly forgiven all those who wittingly or unwittingly hurt me.

I would include the way my mother and I fell in love when she was 89, and the incredible story of her baptism at the age of 92. Also, I must

explain, in detail, the healing journey of my PTSD through staying close to God.

Someday I will write about my life since being baptised; describing the innumerable number of victories Jesus has brought me through including the joy and fulfillment of marriage. My children are all happily married, and I have seven healthy grandchildren.

After my baptism I never again had a drink or took drugs. The family pattern of abuse and self-abuse has been broken. I keep strong by constantly praying in the beautiful language God gave me through the Holy Spirit when I was 14 years old.

But I will tell all these testimonies another day.

Endnotes

1 “loss of memory, insomnia, terrifying dreams, pains, emotional instability, diminution of self-confidence and self-control, attacks of unconsciousness or of changed consciousness sometimes accompanied by convulsive movements resembling those characteristic of epileptic fits, incapacity to understand any but the simplest matters, obsessive thoughts, usually of the gloomiest and most painful kind, even in some cases hallucinations and incipient delusions...[These symptoms] make life for some of their victims a veritable hell” (Smith & Pear, 1918, pp. 12-13). <https://historyofptsd.wordpress.com/world-war-i/> accessed 14 January 2019

2 My parents led me to believe my sister had died but apparently, she had been brain damaged at birth. The doctors told Mum that she should ‘put her away’. They advised her that she wouldn’t be able to look after her and two other children and an alcoholic husband. She was never spoken of to me, until that argument where I found out the truth. Dad often went up to visit her but when Mum did, she cracked up afterwards. During their argument that night Mum said she had alcoholic poisoning of the brain, but years later I found out from Mum that she had taken some of Dad’s

blue tablets to calm her nerves. Dad also told me years later his peers who worked in the X-ray industry also had children born with the same condition. My sister learned to walk when she was twelve. Years later I ordered her death certificate and found out that she died when she was 13, in Newcastle hospital, choking on her own vomit.

3 Methaqualone, sold under the brand name Quaalude and Mandrax, was a sedative and hypnotic medication. It is a member of the quinazolinone class. The sedative–hypnotic activity of methaqualone was first noted in the 1950s. In 1962, methaqualone was patented in the US by Wallace and Tiernan. Wikipedia accessed 14 January 2019

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joel_S._Goldsmith accessed 15 January 2019

5 When I was in the crisis house and six months after I was baptized, I had no money. Dad found my name in the paper advertising unclaimed bank accounts. I went to the bank and collected \$90 for the \$1 that I had banked 16years ago.

6 A Sydney venue in the early 1970's called 'The Arts Factory' unleashed 'psychedelia' lighting on stunned Sydney audiences, using overhead projectors and Pyrex dishes filled with oil and water-based dyes. These were wild, weird, and colourful devices!
http://www.australianroadcrew.com.au/images/downloads/30_years_of_live_production.pdf accessed 14 January 2019

7 Galatians 5:19-21 says that witchcraft cannot discern the Kingdom of God. I believe that she saw my baptism and the baptism of my children but couldn't understand that baptism is the burying of your old life. Therefore, she couldn't see past the death into heaven.

8 In 1972, fires burned for another month, ravaging the Kosciusko National Park and areas near Queanbeyan, Eden and Burrinjuck Dam.
<https://www.smh.com.au/national/eternal-flame-20021220-gdfzrt.html>
accessed 14 January 2019

Resources

Directory of Drug & Alcohol Service Central Coast

4394 4880

Youth Services

Headspace Y-Central 4304 7870

Kedesh Adolescent Program Berkley 4222 1800

Rehab – Females (only)

Destiny Have, Clarence Town 4996 5558

Detour House, Glebe 9660 4137

Coast Shelter Emergence Accommodation 4325 0116

Life Line 131114

Rape Crisis/sexual Assault (Gosford Hospital) 1800 424 017

Victims support line 1800 633 063

Information for Depression & Bipolar Disorder

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Grief after SIDS

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK513407/

Baptism, Fellowship, testimonies

www.revivalnsw.com.au

NSW Forced Adoption

www.nsw.relationships.com.au